Chrome Shelled Regios Volume3

source : http://www.baka-tsuki.org/project/index.php?title=Chrome_Shelled_Regios:Volume3

These are novel illustrations that were included in volume 3

鋼殻のレギオスIII
センチメンタル・ヴォイス

「レイフォンに関係することだよ。君に災難が降りかかろうとしている」

汚染された大地の上に点在する〈自律型移動都市〉のひとつ、槍殻都市グレンダン。そこでレイフォンの帰りを待つリーリンの前に突然銀髪の青年が現れた。彼の言葉に対し、リーリンは身体の震えを抑えることができなかった……。

一方、学園都市ツェルニではレイフォンたち十七小隊が偵察隊を命じられ、廃都市に赴くことになる。同道する第五小隊長・ゴルネオはなぜかレイフォンに敵意ある視線を向ける。

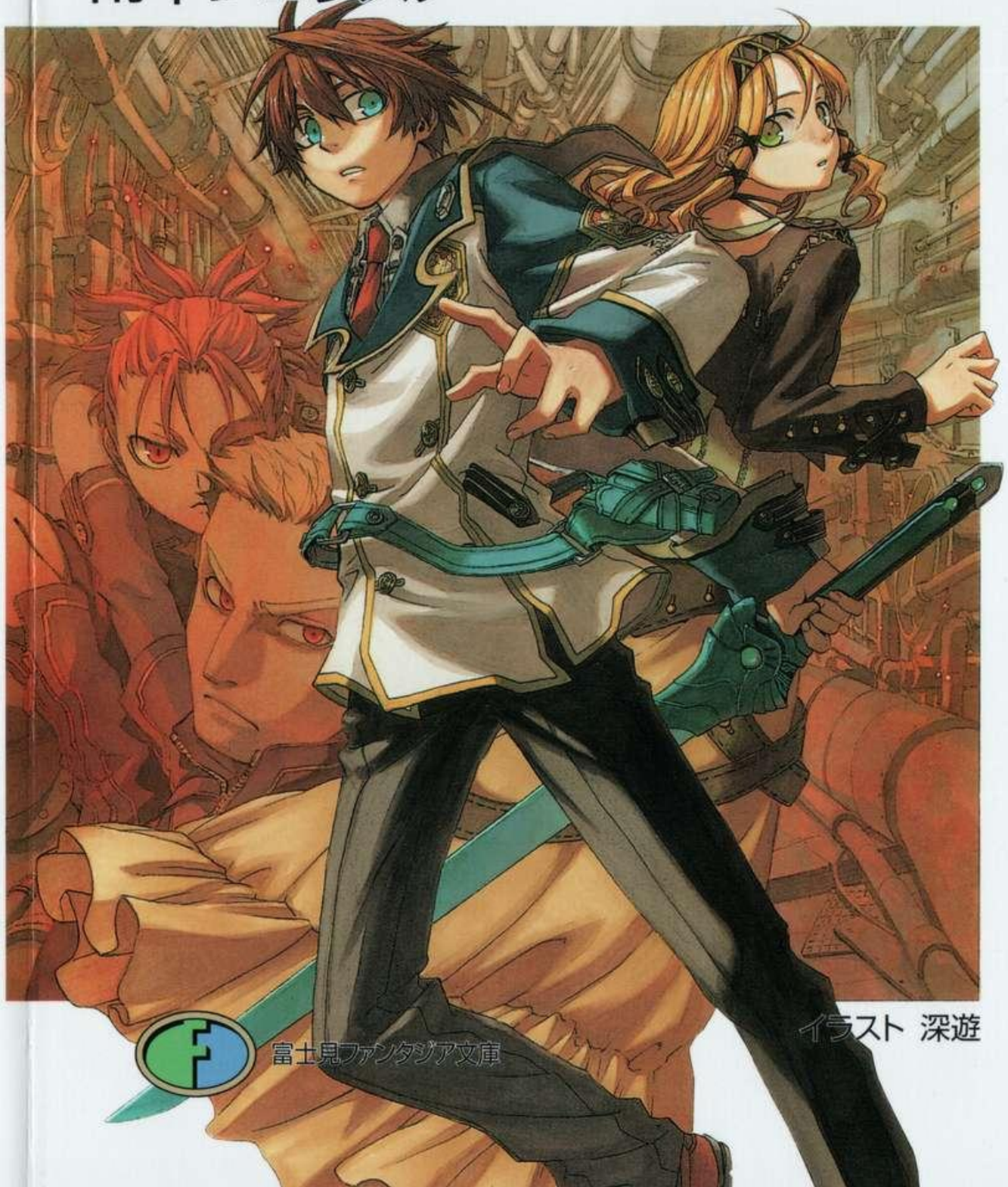
過去の事件に躓くレイフォン。しかし、それを支える存在となるのは――。

最強学園ファンタジー激震の第三弾！

鋼殻のレギオスIII

センチメンタル・ヴォイス

雨木シュウスケ



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センチメンタル・ヴォイス
鋼殻のレギオスIII
雨木シュウスケ
富士見ファンタジア文庫

9784829118467

ISBN4-8291-1846-6

C0193 ¥580E

定価：本体580円（税別）

1920193005806

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鋼殻のレギオスⅢ
センチメンタル・ヴォイス

いったい誰が……？
何のために――？

「なら、
気が済むまで
付き合ってあげます」
「調子にのるなぁ！」

Prologue

The voice that answered was a sharp reproof.

"Have you forgotten Gahard Baren?"

I took a deep breath and waited quietly for an answer. An icy pressure closed in.

Was it fortunate or not? Chance created a sealed space between the two combatants. Under the tense and strained atmosphere, it was as if the two of them were fighting to the death.

As an observer, I breathed in deeply. Just what were these two doing.....When my life was about to end in only a few minutes, just what were these two men doing?

One was wounded. Not wounded enough to die, but he had a few broken ribs and the bone in his right shoulder seemed cracked. Due to the Kei attacks, the armor-suit hung in tatters. It slid open at his stomach. Traces of pollution burns were visible on the skin. A black stain spread out gradually around his wound.

The other person wasn't injured, but his armor-suit was torn from the chest to the left shoulder, and a very shallow wound could be seen through the rip. Pollutants were eating away that shallow wound, but the person himself paid no attention to it. Even so, the least injured person was the one who held the most serious expression.

Layfon Alseif.

"Don't tell me you've forgotten....."

"How could I have forgotten?"

I let out a breath and looked at Layfon.

That name must have touched a past he didn't want to remember. It was a weapon to wound his spirit.

What expression did Layfon hold.....Finally understanding the situation, what changes would appear on that face.....

I swallowed my breath and waited silently. He.....

"I can't forget.....And I don't want to, but, I don't force myself to remember."

An extremely icy expression.

"Damn you....."

"Is.....Gahard Baren dead?"

"What!?"

From shock to anger to stiffness.....Layfon recovered from the malignant effect of the words thrown at him to observe the changing expression of the other guy.

"It's time to let go of him," Layfon said with a frosty tone.....But his eyes weren't looking at the person before him. He was looking at someone far away. Someone who wasn't here. Gahard Baren.

That was what I thought.

Chapter 1: Proposal

"Fu....."

Leerin sat on a stool, holding a juice packet she had bought from the vending machine. The lounge of this high-class, two-story school was comfortable and soothing. Many students came up to the second floor during the day. Only one floor was needed to accommodate those who decided to stay after school. Since this wasn't the only lounge available, the student athletes who came over to buy drinks from the vending machine tended to move to a place closer to the gymnasium.

This place was quiet and close to the library. The senpais of the Language Club gathered regularly on the first floor, but by the time their voices drifted over to Leerin, they had become mere background noise.

"Fu....." Leerin sighed again, gazing off in the distance under the dim light, the edge of the paper cup on her lips. Warm, sweet chocolate dispersed in her mouth. The warmth slid down her throat into her chest.

"Ah.....Geez, what's with me....." She watched the floorboards, her hands cupping the cup for warmth.

".....Should I go back like this?"

She didn't feel like bringing the books over from the library. Her space in the library was already filled with numerous books and report papers. If she went back to the library, she wouldn't be able to leave them alone. That was Leerin.

"The importance of news updates between cities and their consequences on the economy."

The professor had suddenly given Leerin this assignment, to be handed in a week later. Although there was still time to do it, the question was close to impossible for Leerin, who had only recently entered this school. All of the reference books were professional. If she wanted to understand them, she would have to have a large repertoire of professional vocabulary. She had been pulling books off to read just to understand the reference books, and in turn, had been pulling more books to understand the books that explained those reference books.

".....Guh, my basic knowledge isn't good enough. Besides, these numbers mean nothing if I can't understand them. Really.....what should I do?"

And so she had spent two hours after class piling up books. This wasn't a problem with tepid enthusiasm. To escape the problem dogging her, she reached inside her breast pocket.

She touched something hard and took out a small box for letters . She cautiously took out a letter and spread it out.

"His handwriting's still ugly....."

Leerin's face relaxed automatically. She started to read the letter that she had already read numerous times.

How have you been lately? I'm still the same.

Ah, not entirely the same as usual. What you were worrying about has happened over here. A filth monster came close to Zuellni again. Zuellni wasn't aware of it, as the filth monster was in its molting phase. Fortunately, the city's drones discovered it and we managed to avoid the worst-case scenario. But.....just like what you were afraid of, I chose to fight alone.

The fight was intense, just like the battles I had tired of in Grendan. As a Heaven's Blade successor, I had no time for anything besides fighting filth monsters outside the city. I was being extremely careful to avoid getting wounded, because if I did, I might have fallen to pollutants.

I knew about that danger, but I've never chosen to fight with anyone before.

No, even from the beginning I never considered it.

I forgot I no longer had the Heaven's Blade, and I did something foolish. In truth, it was dangerous. No, extremely dangerous.

I even knew my weapon wasn't reliable. Although I know what a Heaven's Blade is, when I was holding my weapon, I fought like before..... .Am I too arrogant? I couldn't help but be immersed in it, so your words cut straight to my core.

But, about that fight, it won't happen again.

I'll try not to fight alone again.

I no longer believe I cannot give up Military Arts. It's tiring, but I'll try to overcome it.

I haven't given up on finding a path besides Military Arts, except, right now, I can't lose Zuellni. This place is a new place, a fresh start for me, so I can't lose it. Perhaps this feeling can relieve some of my tiredness .

Leerin, it's because of you that I can accept Military Arts like this. I think I haven't entirely given up Military Arts because you're part of my past in Grendan. Perhaps this is a very fortunate thing.

You said that, in truth, I like Military Arts. I haven't yet had that feeling, but since you said so, it might be true. At least, the me now came from the me who spent ten years immersed in Military Arts, so that must be an important part of me. It's a blessing that I haven't lost it, and the Leerin who prevented me from losing it is also someone irreplaceable and important to me.

I also feel that it'll be very hard to communicate for six years through letters.

Why can't we break through this wall of distance?

I believe we can.

Hope everything works out for you!

Layfon Alseif.

She finished reading.....Although she had read it many times, she still read it closely. Reading it and losing herself in thought. Reading it in joy...And anger.

She was happy that he said she was important to him, but he was so slow that he didn't understand her real feelings. She was lost in thought because of his slowness and clumsiness, and then she became angry. Just how many more pieces of paper did she have to sacrifice until he would understand.....

"Aah, really....."

She knew that by reading the letter, she'd forget about the report she needed to write...But it still made her feel tired.

(I'll just sleep here on the stool.)

"Haha....."

"?"

Someone was laughing.

"Hm?" Leerin turned around and saw a young man sitting on a chair against the wall behind her.

"Ah, excuse me."

Seeing how he had watched her while she was reading the letter , Leerin's face grew hot. She studied the young man.

A long mane of silver hair hung neatly down his back. His sleeves were short despite the cold weather. A harmless laugh, and his laugh wasn't tasteless.

But if he was laughing at her, then she wouldn't feel well disposed towards him.

"......Excuse me, who are you? You don't look like a student here ."

His arms were muscular. Not like a student at all. A Military Artist. It wasn't strange to see Military Artists walking around. Some of the students were Military Artists, but this young man didn't look like a student here.

"Yes, you're right. I'm not a student here."

"Do you need something? There's the office....."

"No, I'm not here for the school."

"Huh?"

"I'm looking for you, Leerin Marfes."

"Huh?"

"Ah, let me make this clear. I'm not chatting you up."

"......Why are you pointing that out?"

"Well, for some reason, the girls always try to chat me up, so I'm just making sure. Just in case."

"You're too self-conscious."

True. Perhaps it was a girl's dream to be chatted up by this guy in this way. But not in this situation.....To be mocked after she had read Layfon's letter. She would have seriously refused this man.

But he had made it clear, and that made his face more displeasing to her. Especially the point that he didn't mean it at all.

"I really didn't mean it. I really didn't mean it!"

"I don't want to listen to this."

For some reason, she felt nothing evil and malicious from him. On the contrary, he felt like a kid.

"Well, what do you want me for? I'm busy."

The report became her excuse. In principle, Military Artists were noble in character, but there were some who were criminals. Even if this young man wasn't a Military Artist, Leerin didn't feel like talking to a stranger who suddenly started talking to her.

"Oh, is it Professor Randeon keeping you busy? If so, you don't have to do it."

"Huh?"

"The Professor said anything's fine if you'll stay in this school. ' Leerin Marfes is a bright student. She can solve simple problems very quickly. Let's give her a harder assignment to do.' That was what the Professor said. If you're busy because of that, then it's okay not to attempt it."

"......What do you mean?"

Unable to express her astonishment, Leerin felt tired. She didn't know why the Professor wanted her to stay, but knowing the reason behind the difficult report.....Somehow, it didn't feel like it reflected well on her.

"Even so, you should have talked to the office and let them contact me....." she said weakly.

"If possible, I wanted to meet you in secret.....It's about Layfon."

"......Huh?"

Time seemed to stop.

"Yes. How should I put it? Actually, it's not that bad, but when it comes to Layfon, some people may get sensitive. So I wanted to keep this meeting between us."

"You.....you are?"

"It may not be a happy topic for you, but, uh, well.....Fate? It probably is that. It'd be great if you can think that way."

"......Ha."

She understood the situation even if he didn't repeat himself. She had no idea what motive he had to get close to her, but now she knew who he was.

The Professor probably listened to this man's request.

If it was this man's request.....Then only the Queen could have that much power.

Under this light of understanding, the name of the young man surfaced.

"Then what do you want me....."

That was all she managed to say.

"Ah!"

And was suddenly pulled away. Her vision blurred. She couldn't make sense of what was happening. The scene of the dim lounge became a series of lines.

Leerin was pulled over in a very exaggerated way.

"Aah!"

She could only make out the young man's shadow in her blurred vision. She was flying through the air. Being pulled out of the lounge and moving upwards. She was being pulled forcefully,

but she wasn't hurt at all. It felt as if some unknown power had lifted her into the air.

"Hah."

Finally she was let down on the ground.

A guest had already arrived on the rooftop. A man with wild hair and a stubble of hair trying to be a beard was wearing a dirty-looking coat. He was surveying the world around him from his high vantage point, his gaze sharp and clear.

"What did you do that for?" Leerin said crossly.

The young man walked leisurely along the roof, looking at the man in the coat reprovingly. But the man in the coat ignored him and continued to study the scenery.

"You took too long. It was irritating me. Just how long did I have to wait? Until I married this girl?"

"If you want it, it can be as long as you want. Since it's you, you can complete Her Majesty's orders anywhere and anytime."

"Stop joking. From the day I was born, I had never heard Her Majesty give me an order."

"That's what you think, right, Lintence-san?"

"Isn't it the Queen's order to kill billions of filth monsters?"

"Aren't the Queen's orders for us to protect this city?"

"It never ends when it comes to talking with you."

"That's true." The man in the coat looked disappointed. The young man shrugged.

"......Well."

Leerin studied them closely, unable to determine whether the two people before her had a strained relationship or not.

(Just how did it turn out like this?)

"So, you're Lintence-sama and Savaris-sama? What do you want with me?" she asked the two Heaven's Blade successors – the pride of Grendan.

Fervent cheering dominated the battle arena.

Layfon felt those eyes looked similar to someone else's, someone he knew.

"There's another one behind you."

"I know."

Although Felli was slower than him, he wasn't frustrated about it.....If it was Felli, she could have found the enemy even earlier, but that couldn't be helped. She hated her own ability.

The cheering from the audience drowned out Felli's voice.

Layfon could see a strong-looking man wearing the badge of the 5th platoon captain on his battle uniform. Meanwhile, the emcee's voice commented.

"Oh, oh! The audience is cheering Layfon on. He has already participated in a few matches; he's one of Zuellni's strongest attackers. In a match against the captain of the 5th platoon, Gorneo , how will he match up!?"

The opponent wore armor around his arms and legs. Judging by the color, the armor was made with red Dite alloy.

(For melee combat.....No, not just that.)

With that thought, Layfon changed his green Dite into a sword.

"And now what, Gorneo? He can't protect the flag if he doesn't stop Layfon."

Layfon had charged straight in from the beginning of the match, ignoring the Psychokinesist of the 5th platoon. His target was the flag in the other team's base. Sitting on the defensive side, the 5th platoon would have lost the match if they failed to protect their flag. On the contrary, if the captain, Nina, of the offensive team fell , the 17th platoon would lose.

(Melee combat.....Maybe.....)

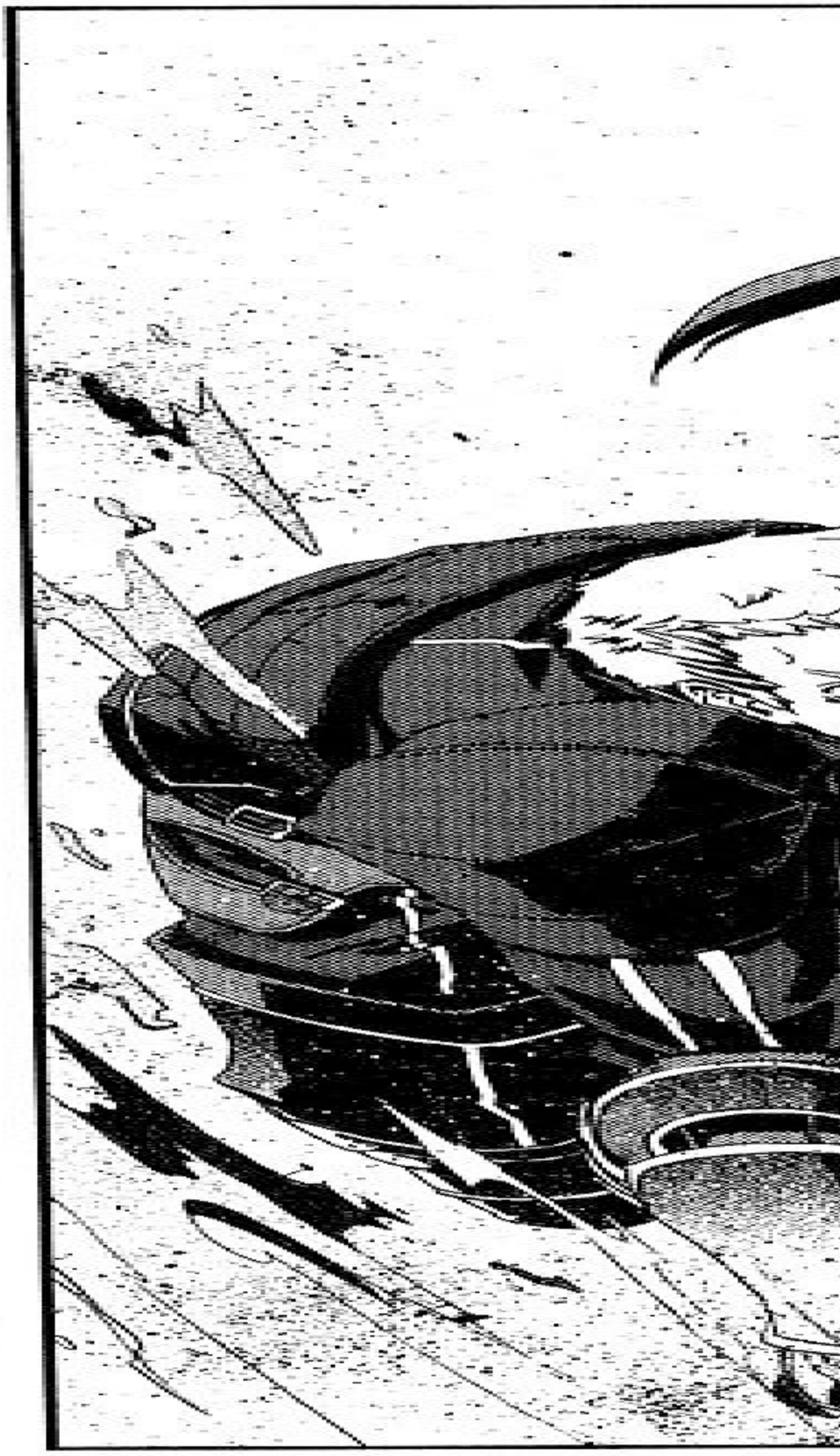
What Layfon was concerned about was the red Dite. He stopped and studied the strong-looking man, Gorneo. Gorneo had short silvery hair. His face and body were hard and solid. There was nothing cute at all about his serious and harsh looking face, eyes and nose. Eyes that might look like the eyes of a good man if he smiled, that sharp gaze was staring at Layfon. A huge fist pounded towards him.

Kei was gathered in that fist, surrounding it with red light. The armor on his arm had become something totally different.

"Karen Kei.....?"

Layfon jumped back.

The huge fist hit the ground. The dancing rubble from that strike didn't just disperse into the air. Mixed with Kei, sand and soil particles attacked Layfon. At the same time as he leaped back, Layfon released the Kei from his blade through Whirl Kei. Blasts of wind struck down Gorneo's pieces of earth, causing them to explode.



Within the sand-covered space, Layfon felt a stirring in his opponent's direction.

"Restoration!"

The key word revealed a red spear and a small body that closed in fast on Layfon's position.

(This is a red Dite too.)

He had already known about this other enemy from the beginning, waiting for her to attack. The problem was ...

(What kind of attack?)

Layfon was still in the air. It was impossible for him to change his posture, so he decided to settle this in one swift moment when he landed. Sapphire, Ruby, Emerald.....The difference between them lay in the amount of black alloy in them. Black alloy made the Dite harder and sturdier, but it also decreased the conductive rate of Kei. Black alloy directly affected the function of the weapon.

Dispersed Kei.....This required the highest level of skill in Kei manipulation. To a Military Artist of this type, no Dite could be better than a Ruby Dite.

Having analyzed what he was facing, Layfon couldn't face this move in an easy manner. He didn't have the leisure to wait for the enemy to strike first. Dispersed Kei was famous for its variety of

offensive moves. Against this type of opponent, Layfon's correct response was to strike first and attempt to slow down the enemy's movements.

And in this one swift moment, he had decided on how to slow down his enemy.

Gorneo *had* to do something on the other side of the smoke screen.

It should be advantageous for Layfon to slide back further when he landed, aided by the remnants of the Kei he used for the Whirl Kei. This way, his opponent would miscalculate.

Layfon added a rotation to his basic sword move and swung the blade backwards against the existing flows of Kei to add momentum to his movement.

"Enkei Shoudansen!"

A loud, strong voice announced the name of the attack. Kei burst out from the spearhead in the form of bullets of fire. Heat pressed down on Layfon's head, and he gathered Internal Kei into his wrists as he brought the sword back to him. A huge amount of Kei spread around him. Layfon spun in the air like a top.

Combined Internal and External Kei Variant, Ryuusenkei (spinning dragon).

All around Layfon, Kei spun up into the clouds like a tornado.

"Aaah!"

That tornado dispersed the heat and the voice of his opponent. The enemy with the spear was blown away, but that small body turned in the air and landed on Gorneo's shoulders.

"Damn. I thought I'd be able to get him."

It was a small girl with red hair, carrying a red Dite on her back. She had an intimidating look about her.

"Looks like using a variety of Kei techniques won't work against that guy."

"I said so already! Speaking of which, how could you attack in that situation? You're too reckless."

"Anyway.....About that guy....."

They looked for Layfon as the tornado gradually lost strength.

And they were astounded.

"What!"

"No way....."

They found a number of Layfon before them.

"An afterimage attack? And so many!?"

Behind them, on the tree branches, in the sky, in front, to their sides.....The two members of the 5th platoon were entirely surrounded by Layfon's many images.

"A thousand....." Gorneo watched the Layfons around him, biting his lips and feeling a bit dizzy. This was a variation of Combined Internal and External Kei – The Thousand Killers.

In reality, there weren't a thousand, probably just about twenty or so.

With nowhere to escape to, Gorneo and his subordinate received Layfons' attacks, but the attacks all missed by a few inches. Even though the Dite had a safety lock on it, it would have been fatal to receive that many attacks at once. After receiving the merciful attacks, the two Military Artists fell on the ground.

At about the same time, the siren signaling the destruction of the flag rang out, but the cheers of the audience almost drowned it out. Layfon swung his blade to disperse the remnants of his Kei, and saw the girl with Gorneo.....He remembered her name from the news: A member of the 5th platoon, Shante Leite.

"Uhhhhhh!" Shante groaned as she collected herself.

"Bastard," Gorneo got up slowly, watching Layfon.

His eyes looked like they were staring up from the bottom of a deep valley.....Where had he seen it before?

(If I remember correctly, his name is.....Gorneo.....Luckens.....)

Luckens.....A name that rattled Layfon.

"My performance was perfect today too," Sharnid praised himself as he spun the two Dites in his hands.

"Yeah, I didn't expect it to go that smoothly. Nina's strategy was successful."

"Hey, hey. Don't forget that it was all on me, Harley."

"Of course," Harley shrugged and took Sharnid's Dites for maintenance.

"In truth, the captain's strategies have been pretty successful in the last two matches."

Sitting in a chair, Layfon listened to their conversation and looked at Nina.

"That was because of everyone's hard work," Nina smiled sourly. She didn't look satisfied.

First, Layfon acted as bait, followed by Nina. Sharnid sneaked through the enemy line, avoiding the Psychokinesist as he did so. When Layfon fought enemies, Nina drew out the rest of the enemy teammates to make an opening for Sharnid, who successfully moved into his firing position overlooking the flag.

Sharnid was using close-quarters gun combat, and the technique fitted beautifully with Nina's strategies.

While trying to reinforce the main attackers, Gorneo and Shante , the rest of the 5th platoon members had been a bit slow in their reaction. Sharnid had always fought long distance. Changing from that to a close range attack had given them unexpected results.

"Sharnid's hidden ability has given us good results so far.....But that strategy must have been analyzed thoroughly in the last two matches. We still haven't fought the 1st platoon, Commander Vance's platoon. So I don't think we should let down our guard."

"Hey, hey, I've been waiting a long time for this feeling. Don't smother it with worry."

"But....."

"Let's just celebrate our victory today. If you got anything to consider, you can leave it till tomorrow."

Layfon could tell Nina wanted to say something, but she swallowed it because of Sharnid's words.

"Okay, let's do that then."

"Yeah, let's leave the terrible topic for now. Let's celebrate. The usual at Mule? I'll book a table. Let's meet up again at 6. Now, dismissed."

"Hey, don't just decide on your own," Nina said. Sharnid was already heading for the showers.

"Oh alright. Dismissed."

Looking at the Nina like that, Layfon smiled. Someone's gaze pricked his face, so he turned around.

Standing to the side was Felli, pouting.

The world was polluted.

When did that happen? Why? How did it happen?

Those questions were lost in antiquity. No records remained.

Pollution stopped the normal cycles of life and killed all the creatures. The earth turned red and arid. Wind and sand swallowed the bones of corpses. The plants that adapted and survived were filled with poison. A strange new ecosystem arose in this new world, giving birth to greedy and stubborn filth monsters. This was no longer a place for humans.

Regios.

Humanity's new earth. The only place where humans, rejected by nature, could live. A world drifting in this world, created by a long lost technique.

In these artificial worlds, people were born, and people died.....

At the same time, they fought.....

"Number 3! Mifi! I'm gonna sing!"

Mifi grabbed a microphone and all of a sudden the shop was filled with loud cheers.

Zuellni had a number of streets lined with shops. The most prosperous street was the one with numerous stations for roaming buses, parking lots and facilities for people planning to go to other cities – Sarnaky.

Layfon and everyone else were inside a shop on Sarnaky Street called Mule. Inside Mule was a bar and a lot of empty space, with only a few tables and chairs. Usually, the bar was full of wines and beers, but today, the shelves were filled with empty bottles. On the counter were trays and trays of sumptuous dishes.

"Oh well. If it's something they like it'll be alright even if they aren't drunk."

Sitting at the bar, Sharnid placed a wine cup to his lips with dull eyes. This bar had no audio equipment. The members of the 17th platoon and their guests must have brought some along with them .

"Sharnid, aren't you gonna sing?"

"I'll pass. My singing isn't for everyone."

"Ah, really? Then when do you sing?"

"When I'm alone with someone."

"Hmm, would that someone be someone not here tonight?"

"You're harsh," Sharnid said to the hostess. Sitting next to Sharnid, Layfon was drinking juice and letting the rowdy atmosphere roll over him.

Along with Mifi's song, singing that didn't sound too bad echoed through the shop and the male students couldn't help but cheer. They were Sharnid's classmates, a male and female choir, reading from scores and chatting at the same time. Harley was also there with his friends. Another group was there, staying slightly distant from the other groups. A group of girls who looked serious and earnest. The atmosphere over there was a bit different. The girls were all chatting happily amongst themselves. In that group were Meishen and Naruki, and Nina was in the center of the group . Nina was talking to Naruki, who listened with a troubled expression on her face.

(What's she talking about?) Layfon thought, but he had no intention of walking over to find out. He had just escaped from Nina's friends and moved over to the bar. He didn't want to go back to that thick atmosphere again.

"It really is rowdy here."

Mifi's singing and the sound of the door opening drifted over to Layfon. Having already sensed the movement through his Military Artist ears, Layfon turned to watch the door.

"Formed-san?"

"Yo, how've you been, ace?"

Formed Garen. The City Police's Chief of Security walked over with a smile that didn't match the seriousness on his face.

"Please don't call me that."

"Well, isn't that the truth? No one in Zuellni can defeat you. You've already become a legend. What do you think?" He sat down matter-of-factly beside Layfon and asked for a drink from the hostess. He reached out for the food.

At first he had called Layfon "Alseif-kun", but now he was already calling him "You guy". Against Formed's familiarity, Layfon could only shake his head lightly.

"I can't help with that title, but a lot of things have taught me that being strong alone can't do anything much."

"Um, it's as if you're talking about someone else. You aren't that old, but it feels like you're looking at someone from far away. Have you had some painful experiences?"

Formed Garen was also a fifth year student in Cultivation. In Zuellni, the youngest student was sixteen, so a fifth year student was around twenty years old.....Perhaps Layfon felt some pity for Formed Garen. He doubted anyone would object if he said Formed was around thirty. He waited for the Chief to explain what he had come for.

"So do you need anything today? If it's Nak..... Naruki, she's over there," Layfon had almost called Naruki by her pet name. Good thing he caught himself so quickly.

"Ah, I came specifically to congratulate you, but it looks like I've been misunderstood. I feel so lonely," Formed smiled.

Layfon had once been asked by Naruki to apply as a temporary member of the City Police. It was a job dealing with events that might involve Military Artists, meaning only Military Artists were capable of doing it. Of course, there was danger involved. Layfon was asked to cooperate with the police and prevent the culprits from escaping.

"Relax, there's nothing you need to solve right now.....But, if possible, I want to ask you a favor."

"Ha....."

Formed was looking at Layfon's drink.

"That's not wine? It might be a problem from my standpoint, but I think in this situation, it's all right to drink a little. But it doesn't feel like you want to drink. Anyway, don't be too harsh on yourself. Your captain is very serious and strict," Formed turned his gaze on Nina. Layfon looked over too.

Nina Antalk. A Military Artist who formed a platoon when she was only in third year, whereas all the other captains were fourth year or above. Her short, golden hair brightened up the dimness around her. The curves of her face seemed to accentuate her beauty.

"Not a bad looking person. It was tragic that we lost in the last Military Arts competition. You and the captain over there appearing in Zuellni probably is a good thing."

"Is it really that tragic?" Layfon asked.

All Regios needed pure selenium to function. Selenium, a mineral discovered only after the world was polluted. Low-level Selenium could be found anywhere, as much as one wanted. But a large amount of pure selenium was needed for a city to function, and that could only be found in a mine. The ever-changing paths of Regios revolved around selenium mines. This was assumed to be true, even though people didn't have maps of the world to check. They could just tell by the yearly re-supply at a selenium mine. And it was a certainty that a selenium mine would reach its limit one day, so.....How many mines a city possessed symbolized a city's lifespan.

The fight between cities for selenium mines took place once every two years. The people living in the cities were the ones fighting in this war. A city's life and death was directly related to the people living in it, so they had to fight without holding back.

"Yeah, it was very tragic," Formed frowned, remembering the past.

A city would only fight against the same type of city. For example, Academy City Zuellni would only fight with other cities that specialized in education. In other cities, they might fight with blood, but for Academy Cities, the Alliance of Academy Cities had

set down rules for the Military Arts competition, turning the war into a sport that wouldn't see anyone getting injured.

"It's hard for someone who's not an expert to explain..... Anyway, they totally owned us. They predicted our every move, and they went through our openings whenever they wanted. That was the type of feeling I got."

"Was it because they had excellent Psychokinesists?"

Psychokinesist.....Military Artists with a special type of Kei who could turn it into Psychokinesis and use it to gather and analyze a massive amount of information.

"Well, I don't really know much about the opposing force," Formed scanned the shop. "Speaking of which, the Psychokinesist of your team isn't here? The Student President's sister."

"She doesn't like this type of atmosphere," Layfon replied.

"I see."

Felli was a genius in Psychokinesis, but she hated her ability. Although her brother forced her into the platoon, she didn't plan to use her true strength.

Layfon couldn't do anything about it.

To Layfon, born in Grendan and given the title of Heaven's Blade successor, he hadn't used his true strength in the platoon matches. It wasn't because there wasn't a need to use his true strength, and not because he would be invincible if he displayed

his true strength. Layfon came to Zuellni in the first place in order to give up Military Arts but he had become a platoon member and was working hard for the next Military Arts competition. The fact that he ended up fighting again was surprising to him.

"Do all Military Artists in Grendan have to have strength like yours?" Formed asked.

"......Not really. What is it?"

"Ah, nothing. Besides you, the captain of the 5th platoon also came from Grendan, and both of you are platoon members. I don't know any Military Artists from other cities, perhaps it's just my prejudice. From an outsider's perspective, Grendan's a place of monsters."

"Uh-huh....." Layfon nodded without putting meaning into it, and asked. "Was Gorneo Luckens born in Grendan?"

"Yeah, seems so. What? Do you know him?"

"No, I don't know him directly, but the name Luckens sounds familiar."

"Oh, then he was probably born into a pretty good house."

Layfon smiled.

"I don't know why he came here, but to him and I, we have a certain confidence in our own skills. Before coming to Zuellni, we fought many battles. Of course, there were opponents like monsters."

Layfon found it hard to say he was also a monster.

"Then I'm fine," Formed smiled, but something shone in the depths of his eyes. Perhaps he had understood something, or perhaps nothing at all. He was a student but also a person who had handled all sorts of things in the city. Nothing could escape his eyes – a person's language, expression.....On the contrary, Formed's eyes seemed to be a trap, tempting people to make a mistake. It looked like Layfon couldn't relax after all.

"Ah, chief."

Naruki and Meishen came over.

"Oh."

"Did something happen?"

Looking at Naruki, who was all keen and ready, Formed sighed . "Am I someone who would neglect my work? I'm still a student."

"You aren't too convincing," Not knowing what Formed was keeping from her, Naruki relaxed her shoulders, discontent.

"Aren't you the workaholic?"

"I'm not up to Chief's level yet, but I'll catch up soon."

"Never mind. Don't waste your precious school life."

"It's my right to choose."

Looking at the silly conversation between a superior and his subordinate, Layfon and Meishen exchanged a glance and smiled.

".....Is it about time to go?"

"About time. Need me to take you back?"

"It's okay. Nakki's here."

"Ah.....it really is ok."

"Right."

Both Naruki and Layfon were in Military Arts, and they both worked for the City Police. Meishen was safer with Naruki than with any man.

Mifi wasn't around. Layfon checked and saw her still reading music sheets.

"She can't stop once she's started singing."

"I'll take her back then," Layfon said.

Naruki returned to the conversation. "Well then, we'll go back first. Layton, thanks for tomorrow."

"Oh, yeah. Is it really alright? If you really can't, we can change the date."

"Don't worry. I'm pretty accurate at the timing of being a light bulb."

"Nakki!" Meishen said as she pulled the smiling Naruki out of the shop.

"What's going on tomorrow?"

"We're hanging out."

"Oh."

"Originally the four of us were going together, but Naruki and Mifi said something sudden has come up and they can't go. We wanted to change the date, but in the end, we still decided on tomorrow."

"Is that girl beside Naruki going to go?"

"Yes, I'm going to thank her for the bento she made."

"......I feel that I'm wasting my precious school life because of work, but you're wasting it in another way."

"......Ha?"

Formed slowly shook his head and said nothing.

She held the heavy staff Dite in a place devoid of people.

(I still can't control it completely.)

Not long ago.....She trained here after the fight with the Phase 1 filth monster and after Nina had fainted.

Nina hadn't wanted anyone to see her.

It was the same with Felli. She didn't want anyone to know. Standing on the outskirts of the city, Felli gazed at the faraway command tower. There wasn't any wind today. Without wild dancing sand, the nighttime scenery around the command tower was clear and unhampered. Felli thoroughly understood the inconvenience of being unable to pierce this darkness.

The world was clearer and more vivid.

She knew. Countless stars dangled in the sky, in the darkness opposite the command tower. They shone and sparkled beautifully beyond the reach of the city's artificial light. The pale moonlight shined down, as if to look through the polluted earth.

Felli knew there was another life form besides filth monsters in this world. Microscopic creatures that weren't categorized as animal or insect. She knew those sad little creatures lived in the depths of the earth, their power of life not losing out to that of the filth monsters. She knew of that point of grandness.

Knew. Filth monsters howled under this moonlight that seemed to come from a dream or perhaps, from reality. Sad and lonely conquerors.

Felli understood this world better than anyone else.

"Ah....." She breathed in the silent air.

She relaxed, and bathed in the light that ran down her long hair to illuminate her surroundings. The light emitted from her hair suppressed the darkness and enveloped her.

Psychokinesis.

A huge amount of Psychokinesis exuded from her body, conducted through her hair. Felli was a genius in Psychokinesis. Even Psychokinesists born without training in the special power but born with their hair emitting light could not be like Felli. It was the same with Psychokinesists schooled and familiar with their ability. The power of Psychokinesis couldn't be increased through training.

The Kei of Psychokinesis flew into her Dite. Felli did not need a keyword to restore her weapon, a translucent staff made of flakes.

The flakes scattered, leaving nothing in Felli's hand. The flakes were connected to Felli through the power of Psychokinesis. They became her eyes, mouth and ears. These flakes increased the communication range of a Psychokinesist. Felli sent the flakes out to feel the existence of the world. She filtered out the burns of

pollution, going back to the time when humanity and earth existed in harmony. She experienced the pale world of night, imagining a picture dotted with the jewels of the stars.

It was a Psychokinesist's privilege to feel the world outside the city. Anyone else would have to wear an environmental suit to walk outside the city. If they went out naked, their lungs would rot in five minutes. Their skin would burn. They had no way of touching this world, because the world rejected them. Even so, there were people who still had to get out. Those who fought.

"I don't understand," Felli murmured.

Through her innate feeling and the feeling she acquired through maturity, something else felt peculiar. Perhaps.... Something wasn't right. This feeling was similar to the one she had when she met him.

Layfon Alseif.

A feeling of hating one's own ability, but being admired by others.....His past was different from Felli's, and for that past, he planned to abandon Military Arts. Layfon's past was more strained and distressing. He had experienced more hurt and pain than Felli. He was different from her, who was born to be a Psychokinesist.

No. If it was about ability, then his ability had forced him to choose the path of a Military Artist. Layfon used his ability as a tool for survival. People wanting Felli to become like that were all around her.

Both Layfon and Felli attempted to head for a path other than the paths they were already treading, and both had experienced setbacks. And their experiences were different. Layfon had experienced a setback, whereas Felli chose to have a setback.

(Could I be wrong?)

(No.)

Layfon came to Zuellni for a road besides Military Arts. What prevented him from chasing his dream were Zuellni's current situation and Felli's brother, who knew of Layfon's past – Karian.

At first, Layfon hated it. He should have hated the platoon match..... But he didn't look like that now. He didn't look keen in the matches, but he didn't give up fighting.

(He really is indecisive.)

He hadn't given up on finding a path outside Military Arts, but he didn't ignore what he was capable of doing.

And people thought he was zealous.

(A helplessly good-natured person.)

But perhaps, the road Layfon picked was right.

(Or.....)

Or..... feeling something murky weighing on her, she shook her head and called back the flakes. She came here to clear her mind. Wasn't it meaningless to consider so much.....

"?"

Something was out there in the darkness. She had almost missed it because of the mountains. It wasn't possible to discover it through the reflection of light. She probed with ultrasound and electromagnetic waves. The flakes approached the source of the disturbance. It wasn't far. Judging by the city's speed, that thing was two days or so from Zuellni. If she let the flakes head for that thing's location, daylight would arrive. The flakes hovered a short distance from it and began their investigation.

Looking at the numbers surfacing in her consciousness, Felli swallowed.

"This is....."

Chapter 2: After a day of rest

A breeze blew in the morning. Leerin felt as if she hadn't slept the night before. This strange feeling came about because of what had happened the day before yesterday. Whatever had happened, the passing of a day had put that event in the past. Time was merciless, but it treated everyone fairly. No matter how astonished and shocked Leerin was, it wasn't possible to reverse the flow of time.

As she neared the school, she heard other classmates greeting each other. She only joined them, as she walked on the path shaded by tree canopy that headed towards the school entrance.

"Fu....." She had been sighing continuously since morning, and she was aware of the reason behind it.

".....The muscles on my back are twisted."

All of a sudden, something intruded from behind Leerin's armpits to grab hold of her breasts.

"Ahahahahahaha!!"

A pair of hands was caressing her front. Because it was so sudden, Leerin had dropped her schoolbag and stood spaced out for a little while.

"Oh, Leerin's chest is the same as before. It feels good."

".....Please stop voicing your lamentations so deeply."

A face leaped into Leerin's line of sight.

"Ah~ If I don't do this, I can't feel the arrival of a new day."

"Please get rid of your habit..."

Long black hair covered a large part of Leerin's vision. The " hehe" laughter ruined the elegant face that the black hair revealed.

"But Lee-chan's breasts feel too good."

"That's not true."

Finally escaping the evil palms, Leerin felt helpless.

Synola Aleisla. She belonged to the research laboratory that was located in the same area of the school. Leerin felt many gazes on her side.

A body that matched her long limbs..... The protruding parts and depressions of Synola's body were perfectly outlined. Lab personnel had no uniform. Synola's clothes seemed to emphasize her body build, so it couldn't be helped that she stood out in the crowd.

"No, no. It's a shame really, but whether it feels good or not is meaningless to the owner of the body. It's your body after all, but it isn't necessarily the best for anyone. What's most important is that it suits my hands. That feeling of being just right, but with enough left over. That's a soft feeling that no sweets can match. Ah ~~"

Synola looked like she was reminiscing something really deep.... She started to shake her head like an old man.

"You're the best."

"......Please stop," Leerin said.

Synola really didn't look normal to be able to say something like this early in the morning. Besides, she was gesturing before Leerin's breast as she said that.

"......Well, did something happen to Leerin-chan?"

"Huh?"

Synola's hands returned to her pant pockets. Her expression turned back to normal. She was already beautiful, and that pose made people's hearts jump.

"You've been sighing while fidgeting. This says that something's happened."

"Ah....." Leerin thought she had done enough to cover her worries, but it seemed she had failed.

"Sorry."

"Hmm~, Isn't it meaningless to apologize to me?"

"Yeah....."

"Never mind. It's ok if you don't want to explain."

Sometimes Leerin wanted to pull in that distance, but their relationship was far apart. She was thankful for Synola's sensitivity , her ability to see through what should be and should not be touched, but she also felt her own inadequacy in this area.

(Maybe I can try telling her?)

She looked at Synola. Either way, as a beautiful woman, she was somewhat strange in wanting to touch other girls' breasts. And for some reason, Synola started laughing in that 'hehe' way.

(Um.....)

"Ah, cookies are nice, but it's not bad to try fruits sometimes."

"Ha?"

"I'm saying Lee-chan's breasts are very soft, and they're also bouncy. This is great! To put it the other way.....they feel like cookies."

".....Thanks."

"So I say cookies are always the best, but I can better experience that feeling by not eating cookies all the time. So it's good to change taste sometime and try the hard nut."

Her hands moved.

"Like this. I can feel their weight by holding their bottoms, and caress them with that resistant feeling of hardness. I guess they

don't lose their shape in sleep.....I can feel them by searching and touching like this."

"Just what are you saying?"

"Ah, it's not bad to touch Lee-chan's breasts like this sometimes, but wouldn't that hurt? I can't do something that makes you hate me."

"Just what are you saying!?" Leerin shouted angrily with her face all red. Synola showed no intention of answering.

"I was just talking to myself ambitiously."

Looking at Synola's breasts, Leerin burst out. "Isn't your ambition over there.....?"

(Ah.....Grendan is so peaceful.)

This was the Lance Shelled City, Grendan, a city that had more fights with filth monsters than any other city in the world. Every year there were five to six emergencies. As the emergency siren sounded, Grendan's residents would move towards the shelters as if they were out on a road trip. They followed the procedures without pushing and fighting for a place in the shelter.

Yes, that wasn't necessary at all, because their Queen was leading them. A Queen who also was a Heaven's Blade successor.

Alsheyra Almonise.

Grendan was probably the only city that had experienced this much danger, but Grendan's residents believed it was the safest city on earth. Under the protection of the Queen and the Heaven's

Blade successors, the threat of filth monsters was nothing. Grendan had also fought many times against filth monsters in their mature phases, and that wasn't recorded in Grendan's history books. In the fifteen years of Leerin's life, Grendan had fought those mature forms many times.

The number of fights the city encountered was unusual for a mobile city that aimed to evade as many filth monsters as possible. Even if a large number of filth monsters stood in Grendan's path, Grendan did nothing to change its path and avoid them. Some people from other cities even called Grendan "A city that has gone mad".

Leerin thought that that might be true. Her conviction received support when she read from Layfon's letters that Zuellni had not encountered any filth monsters for a long while. Even so, there were also the Heaven's Blade successors in Grendan. The people relied on their skills to protect them.

After parting with Synola, Leerin headed for her classroom. She greeted her classmates, went to her seat, and once again fell into her own thoughts. She was thinking of what had happened to her.

"Sorry, please let me protect you for now," Savaris said on the rooftop.

"Uh....."

"Your question is rejected," Lintence said.

"Sorry about this, but that's the way it is," Savaris apologized.

"But, Layfon....." Leerin wanted to say more, but fell silent when she glanced at Lintence.

No one would disobey a Heaven's Blade successor in Grendan. That wasn't a law, it was just a mutual habit of everyone living in this city.

"I won't interfere with your daily life.....until something happens. Meaning what concerns me is the time when you're alone . If possible, I hope you can refuse even your friends' invitations. Find some reasonable excuse."

"Um.....Am I being targeted?"

"I said your question is rejected.....never mind."

Savaris nodded with a sour smile. "Yes, you're being targeted. I know you want to know why, and what people have targeted you, but please don't ask."

".....And this is related to Layfon?"

That was what Savaris said in the Resting Room.

Lintence said any questions were rejected. Any resident of Grendan would listen to him. Any of them would think nothing bad would come out of listening to a Heaven's Blade successor.

Leerin felt the same. But if this had to do with Layfon... And that was the only thing she couldn't keep silent about.

Lintence's gaze turned intense. Leerin failed to move under that pressure.

"Ah.....I told her that," Savaris sighed.

In that split second, Leerin was released. Her body trembled as if her bones were broken. Her legs had lost their strength, and she sat down on the rooftop. Savaris, who received Lintence's gaze in her place, didn't look pressured at all. He shook his head.

"Then I'll just tell you this. This is related to Layfon. You're involved in something that's got nothing to do with you. That's all I can say."

(.....Meaning, this is Layfon's world.)

Meaning.

This was the other world of Grendan.

Within the cheering in the shop, a waitress placed a bowl in front of Layfon.

"Please enjoy," she smiled and walked to the screen. The screen was showing a platoon match in the war field.

"......Is this ok?"

"Huh?" Layfon looked back at Meishen, who was peeking at him.

A bowl of noodles also sat in front of her. The smell of food tickled her nose.

"Is it ok not to watch the platoon match?"

"Ah, yeah, the captain's watching it."

Nina had gone to the match with a camera, wearing a serious expression. They would probably watch this video when they next had training.

"So it's ok. Don't worry about it."

"I see."

Meishen looked to be finally at ease.

This shop was always full because of their delicious noodles, but today, the shop was surprisingly empty. The few customers sitting in the shop were watching the screen, so no one sat around Layfon's table. Everyone must have gone to watch the platoon match.

Because the audience seats were booked out, lots of people would have gathered outside to watch the match on the giant screen. For this shop that only had a small screen to offer, of course the number of customers was small.

"Thanks to that, we don't have to wait long for the food. We're lucky," Layfon concluded, picked up his fork and attacked the noodles.

"Ah, yes....." Even so, Meishen still nodded awkwardly and picked up her fork in haste.

(Well, this can't be helped.)

Because Naruki and Mifi weren't here.

Originally, Layfon planned to invite all three as thanks for Meishen's bento.

"We can't go," Mifi had said.

The shop was nearly empty, but Meishen still failed to calm down. It would have been better if the other two girls were here.

(Why didn't they come?)

Naruki said she had something on, but Mifi's sly smile seemed to suggest she was hiding something.

Because Layfon had received his pay for cleaning at the Mechanical Department, he had wanted to treat the three of them.

Originally he planned to work at the Mechanical Department for his school fees, but Karian had transferred him to Military Arts and waived all his fees, so now he had spare money.

"Ha..... Wu....." Meishen moaned at her failure at coiling the noodles around her fork.

Looking at Meishen, Layfon wondered whether he should have delayed the date and waited till all three girls could come.

"Sorry....."

"Huh, Huh?" Meishen lifted her head to look at him fearfully. The noodles that she finally managed to roll up fell back into the bowl.

"I'm thinking whether it might have been better if I had waited till the three of you could come together....."

"Noooottttt. Not at all."

"Really?"

"Yeah, yeah. Yes," Face reddening, Meishen continued to work on the noodles.

Layfon pushed down the impulse to repeat himself, and continued to eat.

Sudden cheers filled the shop. Meishen looked over, and so did Layfon.

"......What's happened?"

"Sorry, I can't see it either."

They couldn't see the screen because of the employees and other customers gathering before it. He could have strengthened his hearing with internal Kei, but he wasn't that interested in the match.

"......You don't seem to be concerned."

"Um?"

"About winning or losing a match."

"Yeah, I suppose."

"So you're still not interested in it now?"

"Um.....not really."

"Layfon isn't concerned about his opponents because he's very strong?"

"Not really. It's just that....."

"Ah, I'm sorry....." Meishen lowered her head, feeling as if she had asked too much.

"Oh, no. I don't feel like that. Um.....how should I put it?" he paused.

"......Military Artists are always the center of attention in Grendan."

"......Center of attention?"

"Yeah. You know that Grendan has an unusual number of encounters with filth monsters?"

"......Yes."

"There're lots of people in Grendan who can use Kei, but it's totally different for one to use that Kei to fight filth monsters....."

"Especially in Grendan, a place having numerous fights with filth monsters, those Military Artists are valued. So between Military Artists, there are many matches like the platoon matches here. There are also official contests to choose members who are to fight filth monsters. In Grendan, one must obtain acknowledgment in an official match to become a Military Artist."

To Layfon, the students of Zuellni were too lax. Although he never let down his guard in a platoon match, he had never felt the tension he had back in Grendan. He was better at fighting without knowing any information beforehand. He could concentrate more in a fight when he was ignorant of everything.

On some level of meaning, perhaps he really was despicable.

But that was matter of fact in a match. One couldn't always wait for five minutes before a war starts.

"I've heard of it, something about a title that Grendan's Queen gives. Has Layton participated in that kind of a contest?"

"Yes."

Not only that, but he had also obtained the title that the Queen gave out – a Heaven's Blade successor.

He didn't have the courage to tell Meishen and her friends about that.

Either way, he did something that caused the Queen to take back his title. He didn't think he was in the wrong, but in the end, what he did was a big issue against the city's system. He was afraid that Meishen and her friends would fear him.

(Do I really have an issue inside me?)

He remembered those sad eyes of Nina's when she knew of his past. Would that pair of eyes appear on another person too?..... Thinking of that, everything became painful for him.

".....Have you also fought filth monsters?"

"Yeah."

Layfon was unsure whether it was because his answer was too simple, but Meishen had a shocked expression on her face.

".....Weren't you scared?"

"Huh?"

"I was so scared when that happened not long ago. I was in the shelter all the time, not like Naruki and Layton, fighting out there.. ....Thinking that I might die, I was very scared."

"But that's a part of any Military Artist's job."

"Naruki wants to be a policewoman, and Layfon.....You don't want to be like that, do you?"

"No, but....."

In a world where humanity could only survive in cities, a world where Military Artists were a threat to filth monsters.....For Military Artists to be given privileges in cities, they weren't permitted to run away from filth monsters.

This was the absolute rule of any city.

(Even so, I want to abandon my identity as a Military Artist.)

He didn't resent Karian for transferring him into Military Arts anymore, but he hadn't removed all of his dissatisfaction with Karian for preventing his dream from becoming a reality.

(Perhaps.....)

Perhaps the part of him in Grendan didn't want him to abandon his identity as a Military Artist. It seemed almost impossible to

give up Military Arts and pick up something else. It was like starting all over again, walking an even harder and more painful road.

The name Layfon Alseif was taboo in Grendan.

(Her Majesty had no choice but to exile me.)

He shook his head, scolding himself for revisiting the possibility of returning to Grendan and realizing how foolish he was to consider it.

"Layton?"

"Uh? Ah, nothing."

Meishen's bowl was empty.

"Shall we go to another shop for dessert? It's noisy here."

"Huh? Um, OK."

"Do you know of any good places around?" Layfon said.

"......Um, anywhere is fine?"

"Anywhere's fine if you think it's good."

"Then, just a little bit farther from here."

"Let's go then."

Meishen led him out and in the direction of the school where many facilities were gathered.

"Is it ok there?"

"Yeah, it's got some very delicious ice cream."

"Oh, um, that's all?"

The place they were heading for was near the school, but it was different from the place they went to everyday. Layfon wasn't aware of such a shop.

"I chanced across it a few days ago."

Walking and talking like that, Meishen seemed quite happy. The tension she held back in the shop was gone. She seemed to have gradually gotten used to not having Naruki and Mifi around.

(Does that mean she's accepted me?)

He felt that this was his proof for getting used to his life in Zuellni.

They came to a park. The gaps between the trees fencing the park revealed a few school buildings. Inside the parks were also a large number of trees. A place to put one's worries at ease.

"This is close to the Alchemy course campus."

"Yeah."

It was the weekend, and smoke in hard-to-believe colors blew out from the windows of an Alchemy building. Someone must be conducting some strange experiment. Although Layfon didn't know whether the experiment was a success or not, he hoped there wasn't any harmful substance mixed in that smoke. As for his lack of surprise in the sounding of the alarm, that must be more proof of his being inured to life in the Academy city.

"It's that stall over there," Meishen pointed at a stall painted in the colors of the rainbow. She too, didn't seem to notice the alarm going off.

"A stall?" He thought they were only taking a shortcut through the park.

"I found it by coincidence. Great that it's open today."

For sure. Most people should be gathered at the war field or outside it, so the chance of the stall opening today couldn't be that high.

Meishen ordered an orthodox vanilla flavored ice-cream. Layfon spent some time worrying about picking a not too sweet ice-cream and in the end decided on one with a soft serve yogurt.

"You don't seem to like sweets, sorry....."

"Not a problem. This is delicious."

Actually, the soft serve yogurt suited his tastes perfectly. While looking around for a nearby bench as he licked the ice-cream, someone caught his attention.

Two people, one riding a wheelchair

"......Ah."

"Ah....."

Having noticed each other, Layfon and the person sitting on the bench next to the wheelchair called out.

"Good afternoon. How unexpected meeting you here," Harley said.

So to speak with Harley, Layfon stuffed the ice-cream in his mouth and stood up from the chair to wave at him.

"Good afternoon. Did you go to the lab today too?"

"Yeah, just to accompany someone. We're restocking some sugar for the brain," Harley said with a that's-how-it-is expression as he looked at the person eating ice-cream in the wheelchair.

That person hadn't yet turned his head around.

"He's Kirik Seron. We work in the same lab."

Kirik stared at Harley with a troublesome gaze, but Harley ignored him.

"You said you wanted company. Oh, he's Layfon."

"......What did you say?" Kirik's gaze swung to Layfon.

A delicate face and pale, unhealthy skin from spending too much time indoors. Kirik gave off the weak air of a patient, which might have something to do with the wheelchair he was sitting in. But the way he glared at Layfon swept clean that feeling of weakness he gave off.

"So you were the one who destroyed my work?"

"Work?"

"He made your new Dite."

"Oh....."

In the previous fight with the filth monster in its aged phase, Layfon was given a Dite that was combined with different types of alloys. And the inventor of that Dite refused to show himself using the excuse of his dislike of meeting strangers.....

"Really, you really did it. Rather than letting you handle my art like that, I'd rather have had it eaten by worms."

"Hey, hey....."

This guy had a critical mouth.

"I don't think Layfon's skill is that bad."

"I could tell from the remnants of the Dites. What's with the messy swings? It's a miracle that you managed to stay alive, swinging the weapon without looking at the paths of the swing."

Layfon, speechless, could deeply feel this man's anger.

(Has he watched my fight?)

Two of the three Dites inserted into the restored Dite were damaged, and Layfon only managed to return the last Dite to Harley. This man was able to determine the progression of Layfon's fight just by analyzing the traces left on the Dite.

"As I said, the compressed Dites are easily affected by heat. Heat expands and reduces the solidness of the Dites, which in turn damages them. So I installed a safety lock to prevent that from happening, but that has yet to become reality because it still overheats after a long period of time in use. Two of the Dites were damaged due to this reason. This is unforgivable."

"You couldn't have perfected it for lack of real battle experience, " Harley said.

"No, that's not the case....."

"..... !"

"..... !"

Kirik and Harley started arguing. Layfon observed them.

"......Is it all right not to stop them?" Meishen said.

"The ice cream's about to melt. Hurry up and eat it," Layfon said .

"......Yeah, I guess so."

Meishen accepted Layfon's advice. The two Alchemy students were debating with technical jargon. Meishen and Layfon didn't understand a word. Looking at how the two had deviated from the original topic, Meishen decided not to interfere. The two of them finally stopped their debate when Layfon and Meishen had finished their ice-cream.

"Haven't we wasted the sugar we just stocked up?" Harley wiped the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve.

"Then we'll restock and review the problem again. I want strawberry flavor."

"As you wish. I'll have chocolate."

After having this conversation that sounded like an argument or a genuine decision on what to buy, the two parted. Harley walked to the stall, so he must also be buying for Kirik.

Kirik glared at Layfon. "......What? You're still here?"

It seemed he had totally forgotten them.

"Um, well.....I'm sorry for ruining your work," Layfon lowered his head and heard the tense Meishen swallowing her saliva behind him.

".....A tool is made to be broken," Kirik looked away. "But if possible, I want the reason behind it being broken to be more meaningful.....Isn't this your responsibility?"

"Of course. If I had used a normal Dite, I'd have had trouble escaping."

".....Yeah," Kirik turned the wheelchair around to have his back facing Layfon.

"My next work will be even better. I hope you can also use it well."

".....Yes," Layfon lifted his head and left the park with Meishen. He saw Harley strolling back to Kirik with two helpings of ice cream in his hands.

"Ah, when those two get together, things get out of hand."

After telling Nina about his day, her attitude became different.

They were cleaning in the Mechanical Department, scrubbing a wall of a corridor.

"Out of hand?"

"Out of hand."

"......Yeah."

"Yes!" Nina nodded, suppressing her laughter.

"I've seen him a few times, but I still don't quite understand him . "You only know to use brute force" those kind of things. He's lectured me a lot, but the way he says it is too professional. It's hard to understand."

"Did he make Senpai's Dites too?"

"Ah, yes. Even if I got lectured, he really is amazing."

At the park, Kirik had said "the path of the swing." Everything had an angle that allowed it to be cut through easily. If one sped up the swing from that particular angle, no matter how hard the thing was, it could be cut apart. Of course, the path of the swing was different in different situations for the same thing. If one wasn't familiar with the Art of the Sword, it was hard to discover the path.

"That person might have been a Military Artist in the past."

"Perhaps."

Nina must also be thinking of Kirik's wheelchair.

If Kirik really was a Military Artist, it was natural for him to look at the path of the swing and become angry with Layfon for breaking the Dites. And that was why Layfon apologized to him.

"Speaking of which, though it's his style, but to say your skill is bad, that's a bit....."

"No. He did point out my error."

"Really?" Nina said, disbelieving.

"Yeah, Senpai saw it too. The cause of that situation was because of my two failures."

Of course, there was also another reason that broke his concentration when he was attacking the filth monster. Both misses had something to do with Nina. Moreover, the Dite itself had been overworked. But Layfon couldn't say that.

The main cause was because he fought with the way he fought in Grendan.

After the fight, Layfon had done some researching in the library on records of how other cities fought with filth monsters. And as expected, Grendan.....the way that Heaven's Blade successors fought filth monsters was extremely unusual.

To fight alone outside the city was the same as being foolhardy.

And the Dite made for this style of fighting didn't exist anywhere except in Grendan.

"Layfon."

"Hmm?"

Nina might blame herself if they analyzed too deeply the reason behind his failures, so he was glad that she changed the topic. And he realized that she had turned around hesitantly. Layfon bent and saw her face reddening.

"What is it?"

"Oh, um.....About the girl named Naruki, what do you think?"

"Naruki?"

"Yeah. Just say whatever you think," Nina coughed as if to cover up something.

(Why is she saying this?)

"Well, she's pretty strong for a first year. She's better at internal type Kei. Besides that, her movements are also exceptional."

"I see," she smiled shyly.

".....Could it be, that you want to recruit her into the team?"

Nina nodded. "Ah, perhaps."

"But why so sudden....."

"It's not sudden. I've been thinking about it," she said, cleaning the brush in a bucket of clean water.

"It's a must to train the best from the very beginning. In the Military Arts course now, there aren't any who are good enough to

join a platoon. We can get good results if we recruit some quality members and nurture them.....so I've been looking around. That's also why you attracted my attention in the opening ceremony."

"Is that so?"

"But with you, you don't need anyone to pick you out," she laughed.

He shrugged. If he didn't get involved with the two Military Arts students who started the whole fiasco because of their home cities, Layfon wouldn't be the way he was now. At first, he was tired of being forced back to Military Arts, but now he didn't regret fighting.

"I've observed the first years for a while, but I still haven't found anyone better than that girl." The noise of the gears drowned out Nina's sigh.

People whose ability in Military Arts was discovered at a very young age were usually kept in their home cities. To any city, the number of excellent Military Artists it held denoted its fighting strength. For the crisis of filth monster assaults and war between cities.....these people were irreplaceable. It was every city's dream to hold in hand exceptional Military Artists, so they wouldn't have let them go easily.

(Could it be.....)

Could this be the reason that Nina ran away from home? She was recruited into a platoon when she first started school here. She

should have been acknowledged at her home city. In that case, she should have no means of leaving the city. She also said her family was rich. Perhaps it was a family of great Military Artists.

The ability of Kei was what made one a Military Artist – the internal type Kei that strengthened one's flesh, and the external type burst Kei that could directly damage and destroy anything outside one's body. The source of Kei was a special type of organ that these people had, the Kei vein.

There were two types of people with Kei veins – the type that was born in a normal family, and the type that was born in between Military Artist parents to increase the rate of a baby born with the Kei vein. In order to increase the rate of babies born with the Kei vein, every city had prize money given out to families who managed to produce those special kids. And if a person with the Kei vein had his ability proven.....For example, one could be given a status equal to a Heaven's Blade successor in Grendan.

(Am I thinking too much?)

The possibilities he thought of might not be zero. This was the world of Regios that he knew. And he had managed to earn large sums of money because of using, no, abusing this relationship the cities had with the world.

"What is it?"

"Ah, nothing....."

He had stopped cleaning, diving too deeply into his thoughts. He started cleaning again.

"No matter what, I'm going to invite her in. I'm counting on you when the time comes," Nina concluded and went back to work.

(I guess it'll be quite hard.) Layfon thought.

(Oh no, I asked something unnecessary again.)

Having picked up Layfon's letter and read it, although she pretended not to have done so, Nina felt tired about it. She still wasn't sure what she was feeling now. Irritation and a bit of disappointment. She was angry with him but at the same time, she couldn't really get angry. She wanted to bellow, but somehow just couldn't.

For reasons unknown, she wanted to understand Leerin.....the sender of the letter.

(Even if I ask, I wouldn't have known anything. Let's just leave it.)

It was time to finish up. Layfon and Nina packed up their cleaning tools.

"Speaking of which, Zuellni is behaving well recently," Nina said as she opened the door for the cleaning equipment. She didn't mean the city itself, but the city's consciousness – the Electronic Fairy.

"Yes."

The Electronic Fairy who used to escape from the center of the Mechanical Department once a week and play hide and seek with the workers had not appeared this week.

Sure, the Mechanical students had no plans of playing hide and seek.

Nina was concerned about Zuellni. The Electronic Fairy always escaped when it was Nina's turn to clean at the Mechanical Department, and it always ended up being Nina who shouldered the responsibility of finding Zuellni. Layfon helped out with Nina, so he also had had a few encounters with the Electronic Fairy. The Zuellni flying freely around with light emitting coolly from her body always gave off a mysterious feeling.

"It can't be any filth monsters coming near again....." Nina said after confirming there was no one else around.

The Mechanical students were thankful enough if Zuellni could stay where she was and behave, but it might feel strange for her not to act the way she used to. Perhaps the city had sensed a distant crisis instinctively. If the Mechanical students knew of this, who knew what expression they would wear?

"Just what is happening?"

"Even if you ask, I can't give you an answer. I've never come across a situation of the city's consciousness separating from its physical form in Grendan."

"Yeah? Well, it's not like this kind of thing will just happen."

"Yeah."

Unlike Grendan, Zuellni hadn't encountered any filth monsters for a long time. That was before Layfon arrived at the city.

"I suppose."

"Yeah."

The two of them said as if confirming with each other.

"Oi, over there!"

It was the head of the Mechanical Department, calling them with a tired face.

"What is it?"

"There's a phone call for you, from the Student Council."

"The Student Council?"

"Yeah."

He handed the phone to Nina, mumbled "finally got rid of it" and left.

Layfon and Nina exchanged a glance.

"It seems something's happened."

"Seems so."

Chapter 3: The time of a destroyed city

The Student Council had only called Nina, but Layfon decided to accompany her to the Student President's office. If it had something to do with Nina, then it might be connected to the fate of the entire 17th platoon.

"What do you think happened?"

"What? Judging by how that phone call was made, this isn't anything secretive."

This was different from the last encounter with the filth monsters, in which Felli was the one who conveyed the secret information to Layfon.

"I suppose, but well.....oh, it's already morning. It must be something urgent for them to call us over at this hour," Nina mumbled as she lifted her head to look at the sky. Gloom shrouded the city. The streetlights were fighting as hard as they could to disperse the surrounding darkness.

Layfon followed Nina's gaze. Purple rays gradually seeped through the horizon, spreading out to engulf the sky.

"Don't overdo it."

"Eh?"

"No matter what happens, I won't let you face it alone," she looked at him.

Morning light seeped through the gaps in between buildings, outlining Nina's face. Layfon couldn't make out her expression, and found that regrettable.

"......Thanks," he said. "But, senpai, don't force yourself too much either."

"What're you saying? You're my subordinate. It's natural that I'm to protect you, isn't it?"

Layfon chased after Nina, who had suddenly picked up her pace. They headed for the Student President's office.

Inside the office were Karian and Felli. Despite the early hour, both of them were in uniforms.

(Did they sleep like that too?)

Imagining the two siblings sleeping immobile like corpses, Layfon found Felli glaring at him from the sofa.

"Excuse me. Did something happen?" Nina asked.

"That's true but.....excuse me, would you wait a bit? Not everyone's here yet," the female helper in the room indicated for the two to sit down, then she spread out food and drinks on the table.

"It looks like this will take some time. You two haven't had breakfast because of work, have you? Eat up. We've already eaten. "

"OK," Nina reached out for the bread. Layfon did the same.

He glanced at Felli. She was drinking tea.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just thinking about what's happened....."

"You'll know soon," she continued to glare at him.

"Yeah, still....." he could only shut his mouth.

Someone knocked on the door as they finished breakfast.

"Military Arts commander.....And....."

Standing beside Vance was someone as robust as Vance himself. Layfon remembered him.

"Captain of the 5th platoon, Gorneo Luckens."

"Thanks for coming."

"What's happening so early?"

None of the two carried with them the sleepiness of having just been roused out of bed. Karian nodded as if he was very satisfied with them.

"It's very urgent."

Under Karian's indication, the two sat down on the sofa opposite Layfon. Gorneo's sharp gaze swept over him in one split second.

"Please look at this," Karian took out a photo from a drawer of his desk and placed it on the table.

"This is.....Did the drone take this?"

"Yes, about two hours ago."

"Two hours? Then isn't this urgent?"

"A bit."

"Um," Vance let it go and resumed examining the photo.

In the photo was a mountain, its outline sharply captured. It didn't look that tall but the problem surfaced quickly. A huge shadow covered the upper right hand side of the photo. It didn't look natural. In the middle of the table-like thing were numerous tower-like objects that were connected together, and beneath them was something that was similar to a ball cut in half.

Numerous multi-legs sustained this gargantuan thing.

"Can this be a city?"

"Yes."

"A war?"

"Who knows."

Under the tense atmosphere, Karian calmly took out another photo.

"This is the zoom-in photo of the city."

"This is....." Nina swallowed. Layfon frowned at the tragic scene .

It was a city in ruins.

"So cruel....." Gorneo said softly.

The metal plates covering the first level of the city were either broken or had been peeled off. Only half of the multi-legs were left and some looked to be broken. The buildings in the city seemed to have sustained severe damage. A number of mechanical plates were conducting auto-repair on the second level. Vines and moss covered the exterior of the city. Judging from the progress of the auto-repair, it had been quite some time since the city was attacked .

"It seems the air purification system is working normally....."

"This city's been attacked by filth monsters."

"My thoughts exactly."

The photo was taken at night, but there wasn't any light in the city.

"......Meaning there're filth monsters around here?"

"We've checked the information in the vicinity of the city and didn't find anything suspicious. We'll continue the investigation. Compared to that, what I'm more concerned about is this," Karian pointed at one of the photos.

"About this place, Vance, does it ring a bell?"

"......Ring a bell..." Vance stopped.

"Wait....."

"I'm not sure since this photo was taken at night, but the things scattered on this mountain look familiar."

"Could this be.....a selenium mine?" Nina lifted her head and saw Karian nodding at her.

"Yes, this is Zuellni's one and only mine. It looks like Zuellni's trying to resupply."

"Then that city was also....."

"But why here?"

"According to my speculation, that city might have deviated from its territory while fleeing from filth monsters, so it failed to reach its own mine."

"Even a city can go mad with hunger."

"What a tragic reality," Vance sighed deeply. Layfon couldn't tell whether he was thinking of the same thing as Karian.

"Well then, Gorneo Luckens, Nina Antalk. Besides Vance, I called you two over for a reason."

"Is it to investigate the city?"

Karian nodded at Vance. "Looking at the numbers sent back from the drone, there're no filth monsters around the mine and the city, but that city was obviously attacked. We don't entirely understand the biological condition of filth monsters, and we don't know whether this city is a trap the filth monsters have set up to lure in more prey. Under these circumstances, we can't wait and do nothing, so I'm requesting your teams to enter the city and investigate the situation. Obtain some real proof."

"......I've no objection with the mission, but I want an explanation on why these two teams were chosen."

"Simple. Numbers. We don't have newly improved protective suits for outside city work to fit two teams with full members. Of course, I also did consider the strength of the teams shown in the platoon matches, so I believe you should have no objection to my decision. What do you think?"

"We'll complete the mission."

"......Roger."

"I'm counting on you. Departure time is two hours from now. Gather your members in these two hours."

"That's quite rushed."

"I wish to save some time, as there's no way of stopping Zuellni from moving," Karian said and saluted Nina and Gorneo.

".....Well, so that's how it turned out like this. Geez," Sharnid said at the exit located by the city's edge. He was the last to arrive and held the biggest complaints among the team. He jumped around, his unkempt hair showing his lack of sleep. "I was planning to sleep till noon."

Nina watched him numbly. "You.....It's not the weekend today. What're you planning?"

"You can't imagine the night life of a handsome guy."

"Whatever. It's better to live normally," Nina said, cross and tired as she closely examined her protective suit.

"It really is light." She wore the protective suit beneath the normal fighting clothes. It didn't feel uncomfortable at all, as if she wasn't really wearing an extra layer of clothes.

"Not bad. Ah, this is what I have to wear," Sharnid looked at his own protective suit meaningfully.

"What is it?"

Sharnid watched Nina and then Felli who was sitting in the back seat of the bike, his eyes serious.

"......Really sexy."

"Hurry up and get changed, stupid."

"Got it," he took down the protective suit that was tossed onto his head, and dragged himself to the Change Room.

Layfon had watched the exchange of the two with a sour smile. The check-up on the bike was finished. What was left was Harley's check-up on the Dites. Without meaning to.....his gaze fell down on Felli, who was bending down on the bike.

"What is it?" she said.

"Um.....Did senpai discover that city?"

"......Fon Fon," she glared at him.

"Aah, sorry. Did Felli discover the city?" he collected himself, not certain why she hated to be called senpai.

"I found it by chance."

"Of course, but....." What was surprising was that she used her Psychokinesis power when she wasn't in a match. Even if this were chance, her action would just prevent Karian from transferring her out of Military Arts.

"....." Feeling as if something had struck him, Layfon quickly turned his head away.

The 5th platoon was going through their preparations a little distance from the 17th platoon. Unlike Layfon's team, none of the members from the 5th platoon voiced any complaints. They completed their preparation under the orders of Captain Gorneo.

(Again.....)

The gaze came from the 5th platoon. The members of their team were discussing something with Gorneo standing in the middle of them. His back was against Layfon.

(Strange?)

So it wasn't Gorneo's gaze. He was busy talking with his team members. As a 5th year, he had the qualities that made him a captain. He could fully understand his members' needs.

It was the girl sitting on the bike beside Gorneo who was looking at Layfon.

Shante Leite.

Judging from the color of her harness, she was also in her fifth year. She wouldn't qualify as a teenager since she was twenty, but she was shorter than Felli, with a face that looked even more childish than Felli's. Underneath her red hair, pupils stirring like a cat's stared straight at Layfon.

(Eh? Eh?)

Layfon appeared flustered; having thought it was Gorneo who was staring at him.

Seeing how Layfon cringed at her hostile gaze, Shante looked away with satisfaction.

"What's wrong?"

"Ah, nothing....."

Felli followed Layfon's gaze to the 5th platoon, and saw Shante grinding her teeth.

"......How petty."

"Hahaha....." Layfon laughed dryly and took the Dite that Harley was handing back to him.

"Is this about the last match?" Harley said.

"I suppose?"

"The 17th platoon is pretty popular outside the Military Arts course, so there are many people who don't like this."

"Ha....."

"Winning matches elegantly. Every member is a junior. The captain is a beauty. Their opponents are elites. Don't you think that looks very interesting to the audience?" Harley analyzed.

"......If we didn't have to rush, I planned to give you your new Dite," he continued.

"......Did you guys come up with something yesterday?" Layfon ventured.

"Well.....something about a weapon specialized for combat against filth monsters," Harley's voice lowered. "The problem of the Dite not being durable enough remains. We don't want this problem to persist, but we still hope to avoid a Dite breaking in the middle of a fight."

"Yes."

"What we can do now is make a Dite that is more suitable for the user, meaning, you. The price of a lighter Dite is to forsake the combined Dites you previously used. When the new Dite's done, please come over and try it out. Even you wouldn't want your weapon to fail in a key moment, right?"

"True."

After Sharnid had finished changing and received his Dite from Harley, the 17th platoon had completed its preparation.

Under the icy gaze of the 5th platoon, everyone from the 17th platoon mounted their bikes. Layfon and Sharnid were the ones driving Nina and Felli. They put their supplies in the spare space. Their helmets were connected to Felli's flakes, making the world before them more vivid. The gate to the exit opened.

"Good luck, everyone. I hope you can bring back some good news," Karian's voice came through the transmitter as Layfon and the others headed out into the desolate land.

It took them half a day's driving to arrive at the destination.

"Well....." Sharnid's shock came through the transmitter.

Experiencing it in reality was much different from looking at the photos. Above Layfon's head was the surface of the broken multi-legs, and covering the mechanical plates in auto-repair mode was moss that looked as if it could fall off at any moment.

"Even if it was attacked by the filth monsters, does it have to be so over the top?"

"It was just a guess."

"The Student President's speculation.....something doesn't look right here."

"The investigation of the west side is completed. The parking bay is totally destroyed and the anchor rope doesn't look like it's been used."

"This is the 5th platoon. We've finished investigating the east side. There's no parking bay and the gate outside is locked," the Psychokinesist of the 5th platoon said.

"Ah."

"Doesn't look like we've got a way up."

"We have to use a rope," Layfon said.

Nina nodded. "This is the 17th platoon. We'll enter the city with a rope and begin our investigation."

"Roger. We'll continue our investigation and let you know of the rendezvous later."

Layfon took out his Dite. A green light followed after the keyword. The Dite in his hand disappeared to be replaced by a weapon with only a handle.

Steel threads.

Under Layfon's Kei, a countless number of steel threads connected Layfon to the city.

"Layfon, we'll go together."

"Got it."

Wrapping Felli with the steel threads, Layfon was the first to reach the city. The feeling of the air shield passed by him. As he scanned the scene, the steel threads moved under his command, investigating anything within a 10 meters radius in detail..... and he completed that task the moment he landed.

"I guarantee you it's safe here. Or are you more at ease unless you've checked it yourself, Fon Fon?" Felli said.

"Of course I trust you, but this is my habit. I still want to confirm for myself," he retrieved the steel threads. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

"How meaningless. Rather than wasting your energy, you should be more cautious."

".....I'm sorry."

Speaking of which.....He was covered in chill sweat as he watched Felli.

This wasn't his first time checking the vicinity with the steel threads, but such delicate and detailed work was a huge burden on his brain.

(The brain structure of a Psychokinesist really is different from ours.)

Normal people would never think of handling a massive amount of information at the same time. Human, but not really human. Military Artist, but also a Psychokinesist.

(.....I can't ignore that part.)

"What is it?"

".....Nothing," he replied, swallowing back his words.

Nina and Sharnid had arrived.

"How is it?"

"No corpses so far," Felli said, emotionless. She had restored her Dite and the flakes were now scattered in the sky.

"Then investigate the important facilities one by one in our vicinity."

"If it's to investigate half of the city, I will have finished it in an hour."

"Yeah, can't we just wait here?" Sharnid said.

"I don't doubt Felli's ability, but there are people who don't accept the result of this type of investigation."

"......Fine," Felli accepted. She had no other choice.

"......Have you found the entrance to the Mechanical Department?"

"Not yet, it doesn't look to be anywhere close to here."

"Right."

"But I've found the shelter."

"Then let's start over there. We might find survivors."

"A very tiny hope," Sharnid muttered, earning a glare from Nina.

Led by Felli, the 17th platoon headed deeper into the city.

"Hey, Goru."

"Hm?" He observed his surroundings as he replied to the voice coming from above his shoulders. He had divided his platoon into three teams. The team with the Psychokinesist had stayed behind to wait for orders. Gorneo and the other team had begun their investigation of the area.

"If we set traps here, that can be explained as an accident" Shante suggested.

Gorneo stopped walking.

They were on a street lined with shops and empty of people. Debris littered the street.

"It's almost impossible to ambush a Heaven's Blade successor."

"About that, we'll never know if we don't try."

Shante swung her legs before Gorneo's chest, but he paid no attention to them.

"Saying we'll never know if we don't do it, shows you're still not mature enough."

"Wu....."

Gorneo's nose stirred. Something smelled rotten. There was the smell of blood mixed in it too. That didn't surprise him, since he had seen crowds of flies gathering in fast food shops, but blood.....

He understood after looking at the black substance spread here and there on the street.

Something horrible and tragic did happen in this city.

Military Artists and Psychokinesists had fought desperately against filth monsters and had failed. The filth monsters had entered through the air shield and spread out in the city to enjoy food other than pollutants.

But, even so.....

"Why are there no corpses?"

The residents must have hidden in a shelter during the attack, then their corpses should also be rotting there quietly.....

"It's strange there aren't any Military Artists' corpses here."

He could tell there were quite a number of Military Artists in the fight even though he didn't know how good they were. Traces of intense fighting remained everywhere, but not one single corpse ..... not even a sliver of flesh was in sight.

"As if someone's cleaned this place," Shante said in a low voice.

In a city devoid of the living, just who.....

"Oi, Gorneo."

Shante's voice called him back to reality.

"Hm?"

"Is it all right to leave that guy because of it?" she returned to the original topic.

"Of course not. I'll never let that guy go."

He'd never forget the shock he had when he heard of the news from the letter. "That guy killed Gahard-san. The Military Artist Gahard-san."

If that was the only thing, Gorneo might have swallowed his anger with a sigh.

But, it wasn't like that.

The letter had explained in detail the cause of the event.

"That guy is an insult to Military Arts. I'll never let this go."

Layfon participated in underground matches as a Heaven's Blade successor, and he planned to kill Gahard, who wanted to expose his foul deeds, through legal means. Gahard wasn't dead, but the loss of his arm had caused some unusual reaction in his Kei vein. For a Military Artist, this was the same as being crippled, to never be able to use Military Arts again.

"Her Majesty is too kind to only exile that guy from Grendan."

Having committed the crime, Layfon had appeared as a Military Artist in Zuellni. Although nothing had happened so far, this didn't mean the same thing wouldn't happen again.

"I can't stop him."

"Goru, I'll help out too."

Gorneo shook his head. "Even though his heart's rotten, he's still a Heaven's Blade successor. I understand that. I can't let you face that kind of danger."

"Moron!" Shante pounded her fist down on his head.

There was a huge hole on the ceiling of the shelter, and beneath it, debris. On the edge of the debris was black blood, dried and hardened.

"How terrible," Sharnid said, covering his mouth and nose with his hand.

The smell of rot filled every corner of the shelter. Layfon and Nina were also covering their mouth and nose. Felli had refused to enter and was waiting outside.

"Is anyone alive?" Nina asked.

"No," Felli replied coldly through the flake.

"Damn," she stomped the ground.

"There really isn't a single corpse here," Sharnid frowned.

"As if someone's cleaned this place," Layfon said.

Even though the filth monsters had eaten everyone in the city, there must be some trace left of the people here.

It was possible there were survivors since the air purification system was functioning normally, but Felli hadn't yet found a live response. Even if there was a response, it might have come from livestock.

"Unless this city encountered the type that attacked Zuellni before?"

Layfon shook his head. Sure, if there were that many larvae, they might not leave behind any corpses.

But.....

"There's suspicion on how the city's been destroyed. Almost all of the buildings started collapsing from the top. If it was a group of larvae, the buildings should have folded from the middle."

The filth monsters had descended from the sky and left via the sky. More than one. And the larvae weren't huge enough to flatten a building.

"So someone's been cleaning the corpses here?" Nina asked.

Even if there were survivors, it was hard to imagine their cleaning up all of the corpses.....at least to bury all the corpses in Layfon's area.

The team returned back to the surface. Their mission was to confirm whether there was danger around rather than finding survivors.

"Gah, I can't stand this," Sharnid said. Layfon and Nina also breathed deeply the air of the surface. The smell of rot was also above ground, but it wasn't as intense as back in the shelter.

"Just what's wrong with this city?" Sharnid complained.

"Since there're no filth monsters, it isn't dangerous, right?"

Zuellni would arrive here in one more day. Before it arrived, they had to confirm whether the place was safe.

"There aren't any filth monsters, but if we leave this riddle, something worse might happen later," Nina said.

Felli remained silent.

"Anyway, we'll stop here for the day. The sun's about to go down. Let's meet up with the other team while there's still daylight ."

"The 5th platoon has given us instructions for rendezvous."

"Ok. Tell them we're heading over.....Let's go."

They followed Felli's description.

Layfon took up the rear and suddenly halted his steps.

Something revolting and hateful seemed to shroud the city. Perhaps it was because of the smell of rot and the unusual silence, coupled with the descending night.

The 5th platoon had chosen to meet up in the middle of the city where the Military Arts dormitory was located.

"The machine still works."

Nina entered the corridor and checked around.

The machine, though weak, was still working, producing its own electricity, and it was fortunate that the air-conditioning worked. The smell of rot had enveloped them from the very first moment when they entered the city.

Felli had received a message from the 5th platoon.

"Captain, Captain Luckens wants to talk to you about room allocation."

"Right, I'll head over."

Nina left, leaving Felli alone. Layfon and Sharnid were checking the vicinity to make sure it was safe.

As Felli lifted her hands to feel the current of air-conditioning and wind, someone walked in through the door.

"Ah....."

"....Ah"

Displeasure showed on Shante's face, and Felli narrowed her eyes to look at the other icily. It seemed Shante was checking whether the place was safe, just like Layfon and Sharnid.

The moment when the two gazes met created sparks between them.

She didn't know why she was hated, but Felli wasn't one to ignore the other's hostility. On the contrary, she struck back at the other's challenge.

Felli had a number of flakes around her to defend herself, and with these, she had enough to handle Shante. A Psychokinesist's power wasn't limited to the gathering and analyzing of information. It wouldn't be bad to use it against this petty girl.

Shante's hand was on the Dite in her harness. Keeping that pose , she looked as if she was about to brush past Felli.

"Hey!" she called when Felli neared her.

"You, do you know that guy's true face?"

This question made Felli stiffen.

"What do you mean?"

".....Serious? Or are you pretending? I've heard of what that first year guy is like."

Although Felli planned to ignore Shante, she had failed to cover up some of her outrage.

"....."

"Humph, you know of it but you're still using him. In that case, the Student President also knows already."

"I don't understand what you're saying."

"Using that despicable guy.....To hide the truth at this stage, do you think we're so untrustworthy?"

Invisible murderous intent flew to Felli's throat like a knife. Shante's red hair danced like strong flame.

"What?"

".....If you're covering up your tragic failure two years ago, I think you need to take it out on someone else."

"What?"

"He would be able to live peacefully as a student in General Studies if you guys weren't so weak. Isn't it because of your immaturity that we are facing the situation we're now in? Military

Artists who can't guard their cities are useless. Look long and hard in the mirror and see how much strength you have before you say anything else."

"What? You.....You, damn you....." Shante trembled and snatched up her Dite, but a voice stopped her before she could say the keyword.

"Stop right there."

"Goru!? But!"

"Don't start a fight here."

"Muuuuuuu!!" she stuffed her Dite back into the harness and stomped hard on Gorneo's foot before disappearing out the door.

Gorneo received the attack casually and apologized to Felli. "I'm sorry. My teammate's been troubling you."

".....No," Felli answered after breathing in deeply. She pressed down on her outrage and looked at the stocky man before her.

"But, that is also my doubt. Shante's only conveyed my feeling, that's all."

"Are you from Grendan?"

"Yes. I'm Gorneo Luckens. I'm the younger brother of Grenden's Heaven's Blade successor, Savaris Luckens."

"......I see. What I just said are my own feelings. They aren't my brother's opinions."

"I understand. About that guy.....they're just my own feelings too. I hope you understand."

"......You don't look like you accept my take on things."

"I can't accept it."

"......How displeasing," she whispered.

Only Nina made a simple greeting to the other team after room allocation. None of the members from the 5th platoon wanted to associate with the 17th platoon. The rooms for both teams were quite far apart.

From inside the common room of the 17th platoon floated the aroma of food.

"Ah, we made the right choice of having Layfon prepare food," Sharnid sat contentedly on the sofa, drinking warm tea. Layfon had made something from the edible ingredients found in the grocery shop in the city.

"All of the vegetables are ruined except for the beans. Fortunately, the fish in the cultivation pond were still alive."

The meal was simple, but it was better than eating the cold food they brought with them. Layfon relaxed.

"Um.....This way, we don't have a problem."

"What do you mean?" Layfon asked, but Nina only nodded.

"It takes at least one week to resupply Zuellni. During this time, classes will be suspended. I want to use this chance to strengthen our team."

"Training?" Sharnid said, unwilling.

"We've accumulated some prize money so we have a lot to spare. There's a good location in the produce area. I wanted to train there but I was concerned about food."

"But there aren't any shops over there. Ah, sorry, I can't make food."

"Me neither."

Felli hadn't said anything, but Layfon understood, having seen her cooking.

"So I planned to ask for a friend's help, but since Layfon can do the cooking, then there isn't a problem anymore," Nina looked at the tea in her cup.

Meishen surfaced in Layfon's mind. Her cooking was even better than his, but it wasn't possible for her to live together with the 17th platoon. She was too shy. If there was no helping it, he'd have to ask Naruki and Mifi to come too.

But if he did that, Nina wouldn't give up that golden chance to persuade Naruki to join the team.

No matter what Naruki might think, Layfon hoped Meishen and the girls wouldn't become entangled with the 17th platoon before Nina had made her decision.

(I guess I'll have to cook.)

In that case, he'd have to consider the nutrients in the food. As Leerin pointed out in her letters, it was a headache to think up a meal that was well balanced in nutrients. He pondered this as he packed up the dishes.

Sharnid and Felli left the room.

"Sorry for making you do all this," Nina apologized.

"It's ok. I'm used to it."

"Do you have time later?"

"Do you want something?"

"I want to have a chat."

"Then let me make some tea."

He made tea and sat back on the sofa.

"I have a question about what just happened."

"......Then Senpai....."

"......Yeah, it seems to be a warning for me."

"For me too, I suppose."

Layfon and Sharnid were far away when Felli had her confrontation with Shante. Sharnid hadn't said much. He just shrugged.

"Do you remember?"

"I know about Savaris, but not much about his brother. The Luckens are a family famous for Military Arts back in Grendan."

"Really?"

"And....."

"......What?"

"Nothing."

If it was about the Luckens, then there must be another cause behind Gorneo's hostility.

"Layfon?"

"......Hm?"

"This is hard for me to say, but I'm your captain and I also know of your past. I've decided to stand with you no matter what."

"Captain....."

"You did something unforgivable as a Military Artist. No matter what the reason is behind it, your deed is unforgivable."

(You must constantly remind yourself.)

Layfon recalled once again what Her Majesty had said. After his deeds were exposed, the Queen had beaten him up and had said this to him.

Nina's words placed Layfon back in the past.

"There're many who don't understand you, and many who understand but can't forgive you."

Leerin was his only comrade. Even the orphans in the orphanage who used to view him as a hero had looked at him with hatred.

His world was flipped upside down in a short period of time.

"If others find out, your situation in Zuellni may become the same as Grendan's."

Go look at the world. The Queen had said. But no matter where he was at, Layfon still recalled his past and remembered it. Karian had known. And Gorneo, the younger brother of Savaris Luckens. People still moved around even though cities were basically isolated and sealed off. Layfon's past seemed to patrol in the darkness, waiting for a chance to jump out of his shadow.

"But I've decided to be your comrade. Since I've decided, no matter who becomes your enemy, I'll never be your enemy."

"Senpai.....please give this up. If you do this, you'll be in danger even as a captain."

He was happy that Leerin had remained by his side, but at the same time, it pained him. He could keep on living peacefully because he was in another city, but there were people back in Grendan who wanted to hurt Leerin because she stood by him.

"Stop this nonsense," Nina laughed. "If I'm afraid of that, how can I be your captain?"

Her smile pulled him back from the past. Leerin's smile was probably like that too.

"What is it?"

"Hm?"

"If you decide something on your own, you'll tend to think towards something bad. It's the same with feelings and thinking style. It's the same with everything. It's because you want to shoulder everything yourself.....How should I put it? Well, I'm not one to talk."

Layfon recalled how he lectured Nina when she was in the hospital.

"What is it?"

"I'm thinking that it's great to have senpai here."

"Wh.....Why so sudden?" her face went pink.

"I'm just expressing my honest feelings."

He would tell her everything. Everything that happened in Grendan.

After parting with Nina, Layfon hesitated a bit, then he went to a door. He breathed in deeply to disperse the pressure on his shoulders and knocked on the door.

After a pause, a voice filled with dissatisfaction called out. "..... Who is it?"

"Um.....It's Layfon."

Felli opened the door and let him in.

The room wasn't that big. Two single beds took up most of the space. Because of the limited number of rooms, the team members

couldn't each have a room to themselves. It was just for one night anyway. Sharnid was against Nina's suggestion, but Felli had agreed solemnly.

Felli should be in the same room as Nina, but it appeared those two weren't willing to spend a long time together.

"It's not good to eavesdrop," Felli said after closing the door. She understood why he had come to her.

"Sorry," Layfon lowered his head.

"But those two are the worst saying what they said in that situation."

"Senpai as well....."

"Fon Fon....."

"Ah, um, I've given Felli trouble as well....."

"Really, I don't feel as good," she mumbled.

Layfon lifted his head.

"Whose fault is it that we're in this situation? Those people don't understand at all. That's why I don't feel good."

"Still angry?"

"Of course."

Nina had known of Felli's true strength in the previous fight with the filth monster in its aged phase. No one but Felli could support with Psychokinesis over the distance that took one day to cover.

From that time on, Nina had reduced her demands of Felli in training.

Layfon wasn't sure why the captain was doing that. It didn't seem she had let Felli go because of Felli's lack of enthusiasm. Same as Layfon, Felli had also wanted to ask Nina the reason behind her unusual action.

But what she did was continue to observe the captain and did all she could to avoid being alone with her.

"......I'm concerned that she allows me to participate with the way I am," Felli sighed lightly.

"Felli?"

"Fon Fon, I don't think we have any other way."

Lying on the bed, she looked smaller than before. The calmness she maintained was nowhere to be seen. What she gave off was an air of intense exhaustion.

"To a Psychokinesist, using Psychokinesis is as matter of fact as breathing in the air. I'm so tired of suppressing it."

"Even so, you still hate it."

"Of course."

Layfon was put at ease by Felli's usual reaction.

But that only lasted one moment.....

"Fon Fon.....Why aren't we normal?"

He couldn't answer her.

(You must constantly remind yourself.)

The Queen's words surfaced in his mind once again.

(Constantly remind yourself that we, as Military Artists and Psychokinesists aren't normal. As humans, we must not allow ourselves to forget this.)

Those words whipped him more painfully than his injuries.

"We....." Felli mumbled and suddenly lifted her face.

"Felli?"

"Outside. A live response 200 meters south west of here. It definitely isn't livestock!"

"!"

Layfon responded swiftly. Internal Kei ran through his body as he picked up his harness and jumped out the window. The steel threads spread out as he headed for the direction Felli had indicated, running in the city illuminated by the pinprick stars.

Running silently on steel threads as thin as spider threads, Layfon arrived early at the destination.

The thing hadn't run away, as if it was waiting for him.

"What is this?"

Dumbstruck, he looked at the shadow of a four-legged creature. A horn protruded from its head. Standing before Layfon was a golden goat.

Chapter 4: The darkness of gushing water

Even if he wanted to forget what had happened on that day, he couldn't. To Layfon, it was a branching point of his fate, and to Leerin, it was the usual end of a day. The curtain of the stage fell on that day.

It was a fine day, as if nothing unfortunate would happen during it. The tiles of the roof used for rainy days were spread out in the audience seats at the battle arena, bouncing back the glare of the sun. The shadow of Queen Alsheyra could be seen through the thin curtain on the stage, and before her stood eleven Heaven's Blade successors.

The twelfth stood in the middle of the arena.

"Wolfstein!"

Loud cheering rose from the audience. The young Heaven's Blade successor waited in the arena, his Heaven's Blade already restored as he regulated his breathing with eyes closed.

Leerin watched with the kids from the orphanage in the audience stand. The young girls put their hands together in anxiety, as if they were praying. The young boys stirred in their seats, their hands balled into fists. They were all calling "Nii-san" (brother). Leerin confirmed the younger kids were all right, then turned her attention to Layfon.

Today's match was the deciding match as to whom the title of ' Heaven's Blade successor' would be bestowed upon.

There were only twelve Heaven's Blade successors. The only time when a vacancy appeared was when a Heaven's Blade successor died and a match was conducted to decide on the next Heaven's Blade successor. The other way to become one of the prestigious twelve was when the Military Artist who topped the year's fight record was appointed for a match with a Heaven's Blade successor of his choice, and won in that match.

The match for today fell into the latter category.

The challenger hadn't yet shown himself.

In a fight for a Heaven's Blade, the current Heaven's Blade successor was usually the one to appear first in the arena.

Leerin couldn't see Layfon's face as he was facing her with his back, but she could see him waiting with eyes closed on the screen. That was enough to put a stir in Leerin's heart.

She knew he was worried in the recent days. He was always smiling in front of everyone, but she caught the shadows flitting past his face. She knew he was worried, but she didn't ask him about it.

He was practicing as hard as usual and he was obviously avoiding being alone with her.

She had finally found a chance to be alone with him yesterday night.

She couldn't sleep, so she got up and went to the kitchen for some water, and as she passed through the corridor, she saw him out in the yard. She changed her route and headed for him.

"Layfon."

"You're still awake."

Layfon wasn't surprised at all. He must have noticed her when she entered the corridor.

"Yeah, I'm not sure why. Layfon too?"

"A little."

"Could you be worried about tomorrow's match?"

"That's part of the reason. My opponent was trained by the Luckens, from which another Heaven's Blade successor was raised. He'll be harder to beat than other opponents."

His voice was dry and irritated. She knew in the blink of an eye that that wasn't the reason behind his anxiety.

"But you won't lose."

"Of course not."

As expected.

Although he was indecisive about a lot of other things, he was full of confidence and arrogance when it came to Military Arts. Because of this reason, he had very few friends outside the orphanage. This end result was because of his being a Military Artist, a Heaven's Blade successor when he was outside the orphanage – Layfon Wolfstein Alseif.

Nobody knew the side of him when he was in the orphanage with his younger siblings. He picked up babies and paced around to keep them from crying. He stayed up all night to look after Leerin who had a high fever. He stopped going to school in order to earn money. So to comfort the angry Leerin, he flattered her like a dog to make her happy. Whether she was sad or happy, he was always by her side.

No one. No one understood Layfon.

But Leerin knew. She knew very well when it came to things associated with Layfon.

So.

"It'll end quickly," Layfon smiled.....

"Tomorrow's match will be boring."

No one but Leerin would have noticed his heartbreaking back as he strode away.

"The challenger, Gahard Baren!"

As the announcer shouted out the name, the Layfon on the screen opened his eyes.

It was an extremely icy expression, an expression of a Heaven's Blade successor that would never appear in the orphanage.

The challenger appeared on the screen. He was in the same Military Arts school as the Luckens. The restored Dites that had changed into armors enveloped his arms and feet.

The Luckens family was a family of Military Artists, excellent in the Arts of hand to hand combat. Gahard had been trained by that family. The rumor that there might be two Heaven's Blade successors from the Luckens school was a hot topic before the match.

Strong and firm muscles showed on Gahard's sleeveless arms. The difference between Gahard's and Layfon's body builds was the difference between that of an adult and a child.

"Can Nii-san win?"

"Don't worry," Leerin patted a younger girl's cheek. "Layfon is invincible."

She didn't care whether he could win or not. What she worried about was his expression she saw yesterday night.

(Layfon. What are you thinking?)

More like, what was he planning?

But she never guessed his plan.

She thought she knew everything about him, but she still didn't know what he had in mind. She knew he was obviously troubled and it was something he had to make a decision on.

Leerin was angry and uneasy about herself for not understanding Layfon.

"Begin!" the announcer called.

Gahard readied his fight stance.

Layfon raised his sword.

The match ended in the next second.

Intense light enclosed the arena. The air vibrated and the ground echoed that vibration. The entire arena shook, and Leerin hugged the younger brothers and sisters as they gathered close. The keening of the arena ran through her head. Fear ate into her heart.

Silence came soon enough.

Feeling the pressuring silence in the air, Leerin lifted her head. She watched the screen. It showed nothing but rolling dust and sand.

Layfon stood in the middle of the arena – in the middle of a huge crater. He swung down his blade naturally, the end of his finishing move.

Gahard had flown back to a corner of the arena along with sand and debris.

"Oh.....Ah....." His chilly screams echoed in the silence of the arena. He coughed up blood. His left hand trembled.

Pointing at his right hand.

"Aah.....Ahhhhhhhhh....."

Moaning with despair as he bled.

Gahard's right hand was gone. More like his entire right arm was gone. Blood pooled around him.

"Ah, Ahhhhhhhhh.....Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh....."

The screen cleared.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

The screen showed the side of Layfon's face. Within that icy expression, his muscle twitched.

Gahard had exposed Layfon the next day to the entire population of Grendan. The match became the best proof of Gahard's accusation.

She remembered it all. When it came to anything with Layfon, she would recall that day. In that match, Layfon Wolfstein Alseif was turned back to Layfon Alseif.

The day when she didn't understand Layfon.

It wasn't that she hadn't wanted to ask why things turned out like that. But she couldn't blame anyone. Not Layfon, not father.

She couldn't consider things like "Just whose fault is it?"

If she didn't look for the reason behind this incident, but rather for the person involved in it, she might have traced the cause back to the debris scattered on her clothes.

That case must be something she couldn't easily face.

The time of peace continued. No filth monsters had yet attacked Grendan. Nothing had changed much around Leerin. Savaris and Lintence's worry hadn't affected her. She continued to enjoy her normal school life with Synola. These were Leerin's current feelings.

Protect. That was what Savaris had said.

To protect her from what.....? Although she wasn't comfortable with his answer, she knew that it must have nothing to do with her . Heaven's Blade successors would never protect a normal resident like Leerin this closely.

But.....It must have something to do with the city.

She pondered this question, but she didn't have a clue.

Noise that didn't match the scenery of dusk drifted to her. Leerin frowned.

The noise came from the high metal fence that was fencing in a flat-topped building. It was a familiar noise of something heavy. As the sound of sparks scattering off contacted blades drifted into Leerin's ears, her stiff expression softened.

She opened the door to the building and the sound pressed towards her.

Inside the building, it looked much the same as other Dojos in Grendan. Males and females wearing protective gears practiced with training swords. As a normal person, Leerin couldn't see the unseen force that sometimes hit her. The wind inside the Dojo blew her hair around.

She headed deeper into the Dojo to the audience stage.

The person sitting in an audience seat nodded at her. An aging male whose short hair was streaked with white. Leerin nodded back and opened another door to head deeper into the Dojo.

"Then.....Next."

The waiting room was narrow, but it was enough space to live. Leerin walked into the kitchen, checked the food in the freezer and thought of what to buy. She picked up a shopping bag and the key to the medicine box, then left through the backdoor.

She bought what she needed in the shops nearby and returned to the kitchen to make dinner.

The noise in the Dojo stopped when the smell of food dispersed from the wok. As she set up the eating utensils, the people from the Dojo entered the kitchen in a racket.

"Good work, father."

"Aye," the person from the audience seat responded simply and sat down at the table.

Derek Psyharden. Leerin's adopted father.

"There seems to be more apprentices."

"Yeah."

"Looks good. Oh yes, did a letter come from the administration?
"

"Yes."

"Really? Then let's look at it later."

The sound of moving eating utensils spread out in the kitchen. Derek was usually quiet, but his silence felt strange today.

His apprentices were being noisy as usual, sitting around the table as if it was a war.

Father had resigned as the Head of the orphanage. He resigned and gave the position to someone else so that the orphanage, the place from where Layfon hailed, could avoid public attention. The people living near the orphanage knew Derek's personality, so they didn't have much of a response to Layfon's event, and they came to the Dojo as usual, but it wasn't the same with others. The current Head of the orphanage also hailed from the same orphanage. In reality, the real Head was still Derek, but he didn't show himself in the orphanage and had moved out to live in the Dojo.

Leerin was given permission to live in the Dojo once a week to look after him.

".....Are you not going over there?"

"Hm?"

"There shouldn't be a problem even if you show up in the orphanage."

"......I can't."

"People over there should have calmed down and thought through it all by now."

"Perhaps.....However, this is a problem of responsibility. I'm Layfon's comrade. To other people, I shouldn't appear in that place anymore."

"If you've decided, then there's nothing more I can say."

"That's the way things are."

The conversation ceased. They didn't speak till the end of dinner.

".....Did anything strange happen recently?" Derek asked suddenly when she was washing the dishes.

"Huh?" Leerin's hands stopped their motion and she turned around.

"What do you mean by strange?"

"Do you feel something awkward recently?"

"Awkward? Is something wrong?"

"Hm, it's difficult to explain. It could be caused by a human..... or could be not....."

"What....."

She wanted to laugh, but she couldn't.

(Could it be.....)

Was this what Savaris meant when he said she was targeted?

But she wasn't sure whether this was linked to Layfon.

"I have an impression of it. It feels like something totally different. How should I put it.....Well....." he stood up, turned around to enter his room and came back out holding something.

"Father," she looked at him, shocked.

He was holding a Dite.

"Leerin, stay behind me."

"What?"

"There's a murderous intent in the air.....It's here."

He pulled her behind him and restored his Dite, watching one of the walls in the room.

The suffocating feeling only stayed for one moment.....

The next moment, the wall had been destroyed.

"Ha!"

Kei shot out from Derek's sword, bounding off the debris.

The cold night wind blew in. Leerin saw a huge hole in the wall.

"Who.....?"

Water gushed out from the water pipe.

A figure appeared. Through the hole and the gaps in between the high fence, Leerin saw someone standing on the road outside the Dojo. That person drew close to them in a relaxed manner.

"....."

Derek resumed his fight stance.

Light in the room illuminated that figure.

"..... Huh?"

"What.....?

Both Leerin and Derek were dumbstruck.

This person didn't have a right arm.

They had seen him before and they would never forget him.

In Layfon's last match.

The one who had turned Layfon from a hero into a criminal.

"Why....."

That person appeared before her.....and in this situation.

He hated, but he had no way of avenging himself.

And he must still hate a certain person.....

"Gahard Baren," Derek murmured.

A golden goat.

Layfon restored his Dite.

"Just what.....is this thing?"

It was a strange feeling. Numerous horns extended from its head to legs like the many branches of a tree, and the golden light emitting from it overwhelmed the darkness around it. It was about as tall as Layfon. This wasn't some livestock.

Tension rushed up inside Layfon, gushing out, showing no signs of stopping. This was a warning Layfon knew from long-term battle experience.

He readied his fighting stance and cautiously kept his distance from it.

The golden goat watched Layfon.

(It doesn't look like a filth monster, but.....)

He didn't feel the hunger from it that a filth monster would have standing before a human. Was it temporarily full because it had already eaten from this city.....but that wasn't the kind of feeling Layfon had.

The golden goat didn't seem to want to fight. Still, Layfon was concerned about its eyes. Those green eyes continued to watch him . No murderous intent, but rather curiosity.

Layfon's image reflected in clear green pupils that were as calm as the surface of a lake.

He didn't like that feeling.

Those pupils weren't those of a normal beast. It was like a human in the body of a beast.....That made him uncomfortable. He tightly held his sword.

".....You look different."

A sudden low voice entered Layfon's ears. The voice shook the darkness they were in. Layfon looked around for the source of it. But there was nothing worth his attention around him.

"Are you looking for the people in this territory? Then let me tell you."

".....Are you speaking to me?" Layfon looked at the goat, but its mouth remained closed.

The voice spoke again. "My body is rotten. It's useless. Driven by mad hatred, my body's turned into flame. I seek a new master. You who I hope for, obey my wish. Possess my soul and see my value. I'll turn the Dust of Ignasis into a sword, and burn your enemies into ashes."

"Were you the one who spoke? Who are you?"

Unknown terror filled Layfon. Was this a trap? Could there be a Psychokinesist controlling it? But he didn't sense any Psychokinesist. If there was one around, he couldn't have escaped Felli's attention.

So this beast was the only thing here.....?

(I should know what this is if I capture it.)

He stepped forward.

(.....Eh?)

He did step forward, but how come the distance between him and the goat had not shortened? Did the goat move? He confirmed again and the distance between them remained unchanged.

"Why....." He looked down at his feet.

(.....How?)

His feet hadn't moved. His entire body was frozen stiff.

The goat watched him, its green pupils reflecting Layfon's image.

(I can't move.....I can't move? Me?)

His Kei flow felt regular, running normally through his body and his sword. He didn't have the exhaustion he had had while fighting the filth monster a few days ago. He was in a good condition to fight again. But why couldn't he move?

(Could I.....Could I.....!?)

Fear dominated him. He felt his own reflection in the goat's eyes shaking. Impossible. He couldn't have seen that. This was nighttime. Even if its pupils reflected his image, even if his vision was strengthened through Kei, he couldn't have seen it.

But he felt he really did see it.

Somehow, the pressure from the goat had overwhelmed him.

(It.....It's swallowed me?)

Could it be the goat's existence that had swallowed him? If not, then why couldn't he move?

".....I must convey this in detail," the goat said.

Layfon didn't see its mouth move, as if the voice came from heaven. This voice felt overwhelming.

"Who.....are you?" he managed. It was difficult to speak. He increased his Kei, hoping that could break him out of whatever that was interfering with his body. Kei spilled out onto the ground, and the small stones around him exploded.

"Stop. You're fighting yourself."

His consciousness clouded, but he didn't give up. He was beginning to forget why he had to defeat the goat, but Kei still filled his body, spilling out from him. He was resisting by instinct. His Kei flowed out for that simple goal.

(Move.....Move move move.....)

He repeated that word in his brain.

What should he do if he couldn't move? No. Anything's fine. As long he can move.....It didn't matter what happened next.

But.....

(Dangerous. This guy is extremely dangerous.)

That was his feeling.

It was all right if this danger was only before him, but if Nina and the others encountered it, who knew what would happen? For Layfon to become like this, Nina and the others had no way of countering this goat.

(I must not let it get past me.)

He must fight back. If he avoided the fight, what he would recall afterwards would be his failure, a failure that he didn't even attempt to overcome. He must not collapse inside himself.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhh!" he roared.

His internal Kei changed.....External type burst Kei burst out of his body. With the sound of the ground tearing behind him, Layfon's feet finally moved.

(Here!)

He swung as the point of the sword traced a line on the ground. The Kei burst forth to cut through the night sky. Explosions.

"Beautiful....."

The voice melted into the air.

It didn't hit back. The goat had vanished. Layfon couldn't sense it anymore.

"Layfon.....Fon Fon!"

Felli's flake arrived beside him.

"Felli.....Where is that thing?"

A relieved sigh came through the flake. Just how long had he been like this, fixed on the spot? His concentration was so intense that he didn't hear Felli's voice.

"I don't know. The response disappeared."

Confusion filled Felli's voice.

"It's run away? No....."

It had left.

He had no idea know why it left. It wasn't hostile, meaning it didn't plan to fight from the beginning.

".....How long have I been like this for?"

"About a minute. The captain and the others are about to arrive."

"One minute? Is that all?"

It felt like much longer. He felt debilitated for having released too much Kei. His body felt heavy, and his fingers shook.

"Just what was it.....?"

He could still feel the terror. His body shook despite his trying to suppress it.

"Damn."

The sword point quavered.

Footsteps drifted to him. No matter what, he must stop his shaking before Nina and the others arrived.

They continued their investigation the next day. Felli and the Psychokinesist of the 5th platoon had investigated the city and found no traces of the goat from yesterday night. But, they did find something else.

"Who would have thought, it's like this.....Ah," Nina sighed.

Layfon and Nina faced a huge agricultural field. From a distance, the green vegetables seemed to be waiting for harvest, but as Layfon and the others drew close, they smelled the rot in the air.

Before them were tea colored small hills covered in moisture.

"Seems to be this one," Layfon said.

The hills were about the size of a house. The smallest one was the same size as Layfon's room. They dotted the field in no specific pattern. The hills were piled up in a rough manner. Digging out a pit then refilling it. That was the feeling Layfon got.

Still, a certain level of difficulty and endurance must have been exhibited in how the remaining pieces of the city were buried like this.

"......This is painful," Nina said. Even Sharnid had nothing flippant to voice, watching silently at these small hills as Layfon did.

Just how long did it take to make so many graves? To search out for all the corpses, transport them, dig up the earth and at last bury them. A long time it must have been to finish that entire process in a city filled with the carnal smell of the dead.

"......Hey, what're you doing!" Nina shouted.

Looking around, Layfon saw the 5th platoon members digging at one of the small hills with spades that they had found somewhere.

"We're digging it out for our investigation," Gorneo said stiffly.

"What? Is there a need?"

"......This might not be a graveyard. And if it is, then who made these graves?"

"Well....."

"It couldn't be the beast from yesterday night? That's ridiculous. Can a beast do such a thing?"

Shante laughed.

"Besides, we're still not sure whether that goat thing is real or not. You were the ones who confirmed it, not us," Shante said from her sitting position above Gorneo's shoulders.

"You....."

Layfon wanted to stop Nina from rushing over to beat up the 5th platoon, but Sharnid had already pulled her back.

"Gorneo-san ah, is there a need to bring back a skull for a reward? We'll investigate somewhere else."

Gorneo glared at him.

"......Do whatever you like."

"Good.....Either way, Zuellni'll arrive here at sunset. I pray dinner isn't a dish with meat."

Members of the 5th platoon frowned.

"Well then, let's go," Sharnid said, leading Layfon and the rest away.

Nina was harping on what just happened back then beside Sharnid.

It was good to have Sharnid senpai around. Layfon would never have been able to defuse that situation so casually. Neither could Nina or Felli. If Sharnid hadn't been there, who knew what the quarrel might have turned out to be like?

"Fon Fon....."

"....Senpai. That's different from our promise," Layfon said. At Felli's voice, he had turned automatically to observe Nina and Sharnid's reaction. He didn't want people to know of this nickname of his.

"They can't hear it," Felli said calmly. "More importantly, please crouch down a bit."

"Ha?"

"Just do it," she insisted. Layfon crouched down.

"Lower."

He was practically bending down on the floor, just like the pose he held in the sports hall.

"What is it?"

"....Your shoulders are a bit narrow."

"No, I think I'm pretty average."

"....That can't be helped."

He didn't have the time to think of anything else.

"Eh?"

Felli put her hands on his shoulders and added her weight to his shoulders and back. He felt something hard.....knees? Something white appeared in his vision.

"What.....What're you doing?"

"This can't be helped. I'm riding on your shoulders."

".....I don't think there's anything that can't be helped about this ."

"Never mind. Let's go."

He stood up, thinking whether he had done something wrong to make her do this to him.

"Uh.....Is this what it's like?" Felli sighed as if dissatisfied, but Layfon was increasing his pace to catch up with the other two.

"Fon Fon, please don't shake."

"That's not possible. You aren't a kid. It's hard for me to keep my balance."

"Hmm?"

"That hurts.....Please don't pull at my hair."

"Then walk with a stable gait."

"The captain and Sharnid-senpai are a bit far from us now."

"I can tell where they are."

"Are you a kid? Really.....No matter. Just hold on tight."

"I know."

Swallow.

"Hm? What is it?"

"Ah, nope, nothing....."

".....Your face is red."

"Is, is that so?" he stammered.

(Da, Damn!.....Careless.....)

He could feel her thighs around his neck. Her skirt was right behind his head. It was made with a special material, but it was quite thin. The feeling of coldness seeping through his neck from Felli's pantyhose increased his heartbeat. Anyway, he must stay calm and not touch anyplace embarrassing. He gripped her legs tightly.

"Ah.....Looks like they've decided to go to the ground."

He realized Nina and Sharnid had disappeared into the buildings below.

"Then we're heading that way?"

"Over there.....Ah."

Felli pointing out the direction had destroyed his balance.

"Wo, Woah....."

"Fon Fon, don't fall."

"Even if you say so, I can't help it. Besides, it's already difficult to walk balanced. Why don't you get down and walk on your own ?"

"No, you're wrong. There's a very good reason behind this....."

"It must be something shallow and twisted. Just leave it."

"....."

He tried to maintain his balance and kept on moving without thinking of anything else.

She spoke after a pause. "......I'm sorry about yesterday."

"Eh?"

"For letting you face an opponent that strong by yourself."

"I don't see it that way."

"No, I'm sorry. I'm ashamed of not keeping to our promise. My determination is so weak."

"......But that can't be helped."

"......Huh?"

"Didn't you say so, that we're this type of creature? I think so too. We're humans, but we aren't human. I've said this to the captain, that Military Artists aren't human. We just possess human forms that can use Kei. It's natural for us to use Kei, as natural as breathing. It's painful if we don't use it.....That might be the reason for what happened to me in the opening ceremony. I've thought through this recently."

From the time of his last match in Grendan to when he arrived at Zuellni, he had never once used his Kei. He thought he had found a new way of living. The living of a normal human, unassociated with Military Arts.

"Was Fon Fon tolerating it too?"

"I thought back then that I had totally tossed it away. I thought I could spend all my time working for my living and studying to pass exams."

"But, it didn't work out."

Yes, there were times when it gnawed at him. Times when the area around his waist where the Kei vein flowed experienced spurts of pain like small explosions, but those times didn't show on his face. In everyone's eyes in Grendan, Layfon was dangerous. If he used Kei, even Leerin and the kids in the orphanage would get hurt, so all he could do was tolerate the pain in a casual manner.

All he could do.

"......If I really seek a life outside Military Arts, I must first overcome this problem."

The pain of a Kei vein followed one's entire life. It couldn't be removed through surgery. A Military Artist survived with his heart, brain and Kei vein. Lacking either one of these organs would lead to one's death.

Military Artists were stronger than humanity, but were also weaker than normal humans.

".....What that person said is right, but Felli's right too."

From the perspective of a student of Zuellni, Felli's words were unquestionable. Layfon was dragged into this situation because Zuellni's Military Artists were too weak. This was an insult to them. But to the Grendan-born Gorneo, Layfon following his old way of living was intolerable. Gorneo probably didn't know what he should do about it.

Felli was probably thinking the same.

Riding on Layfon's shoulders, she fell silent and waited for him to continue.

He spoke worriedly, "Her Majesty once said to me....."

"I must constantly remind myself that we, as Military Artists and Psychokinesists aren't normal. As humans, we must not allow ourselves to forget this."

"Eh? What does that mean?"

".....What I did was wrong."

"I suppose. That definitely isn't an excellent example of a Military Artist."

"Then do you know why I don't have the Heaven's Blade successor title anymore?"

"Eh? That would be....." Felli seemed to be thinking of something. "......Because Heaven's Blade successors are special in Grendan, so they are models for the Military Artists in Grendan as a whole?"

"That is incorrect."

"Eh?"

"Heaven's Blade successors aren't models. All they seek is to show their strength in battles with filth monsters. There aren't many in the twelve who have a noble heart. Of course, it's not like they'd commit a crime publicly."

"Then why....."

"But since they're Heaven's Blade successors, representing the best Military Artists, they naturally become the examples for Grendan's other Military Artists. The Layfon Alseif who broke this rule has no right to hold the Heaven's Blade successor title. They confiscated the Heaven's Blade and banished me. The duration is a year."

Layfon repeated what Almonise had told him.

"......They're already being soft on me for only exiling me."

"But that isn't the true reason, is it?" Felli asked.

"No. The problem lies with my actions during the match."

So he relayed to her what he told Nina last night. About what he planned to do in the match with Gahard Baren, about what he did do and people's reaction to it.

Felli remained silent. Only her breathing was conveyed to him.

".....Frankly, if Her Majesty didn't take back the Heaven's Blade and exile me, a riot might have broken out in Grendan. If I hid myself afterwards and Her Majesty placed Heaven's Blade successors around the orphanage as an excuse of surveillance, there might've really been a riot."

"....."

"This is what I mean to constantly remind yourself. Military Artists possess human forms, but they aren't human. It isn't as simple as having an extra organ. They exist to protect the city from outside threats, but like heavy weapons, they can be double-edged and end up injuring the city itself. Military Artists must be bound by good morals. Even though occasionally there are bad Military Artists, they're only an existence on the extreme end of the spectrum. They'll usually be eliminated by other Military Artists."

"Heaven's Blade successors must be righteous. This principle doesn't exist in the form of the city's law. You must constantly remind yourself that such an extreme Military Artist is actually a Heaven's Blade successor. For someone as strong as a Heaven's Blade successor to do that, then other Military Artists would laugh at and ignore the mutual principle. What would happen if more

than one Heaven's Blade successors did what you did.....If I ignore this deed, then this city is finished. Not because of filth monsters, but because of people going on a rampage."

Queen Alsheyra said this to him the next night.

"Today's situation is a direct result of your naive cunning. Do you understand? Your young age won't get you forgiveness, but it is what led to today's situation. Military Artists are weak. Without Military Artists, people have no way of escaping the threat of filth monsters, and without people, Military Artists cannot maintain a society. The truth that we can't survive if we don't live together is the same for both humans and Military Artists. We must sustain this relationship."

"Since I still don't feel I've done something wrong, there must be a problem in it," Layfon said.

".....And so Gorneo targets you?"

"Not only that. There must be a deeper reason. Gorneo Luckens, the younger brother of the Heaven's Blade successor Savaris Luckens, who is also trained in the Luckens' ways of hand to hand combat. I haven't seen this, but he might have trained in the same period as Gahard Baren. Gahard might have taught him the skill, since his brother has already given up in teaching Military Arts."

"So he's avenging someone from the same school?"

"I think so."

"......Is that ok?"

"I don't care if he targets me alone, but I'm worried about the safety of everyone in the 17th platoon."

If he attacked not just Layfon, but the entire 17th platoon.....

He knew it was wrong. If that happened, he was prepared to fight the same way when he decided to kill Gahard Baren.

"That wasn't what I meant," Felli struck his head.

"Eh?"

"......Really, you really are stupid, aren't you?"

"Eh? Eh?"

"Although as a moron, you'll never understand it.....we're about to reach the rendezvous point. Let me down."

In the end, he didn't understand her at all.

The smell of rot filled the air.

"......Ok, bury it," Gorneo ordered and his team members put the dirt back in place.

Beneath the small hills were corpses. Not a single corpse was whole. Pieces of bones, fragments of flesh. This wasn't even a burial. But someone had buried it all.

"The problem is, just who did this.....?"

It must have been a maddening job to collect all the human pieces and bury them all, but it didn't look like whomever did this job had gone insane.

The day was about to end. Zuellni would arrive by sunset. Although they wanted to find out the reason before it arrived..... They would rest a little then investigate the city one more time.

"......Hmm?" Gorneo realized his shoulders felt lighter. "Come to think of it, where's Shante?"

The second captain was nowhere in sight. She seemed to have jumped off him the moment when they started digging. He asked his team members and no one knew where she had gone off to.

"......She couldn't have."

He had a bad feeling about this. After ordering the team to continue putting the hill back together, he ran out of the production area using Internal Kei.

Chapter 5: Dance in midnight

Layfon and his team ate the simple lunch they had brought with them, then opened the side door into the Mechanical Department of the city.

"The power's cut off," Nina said. The lift wouldn't work no matter how many times they pressed the lift button.

"I guess we'll have to get down along the cables. In case anything happens, we'll confirm whether the switch is off or not. Felli stays here as reinforcement."

"Roger."

They put on their helmets and confirmed that Felli's flakes were working normally. They opened a hole in the bottom of the lift and moved downwards along the cables.

Darkness surrounded them, but green vision appeared as Felli supported them with night vision.

Feeling the touch of solid ground, Layfon retrieved the steel thread he used in place of a cable.

Huge tubes surrounded them, and in between the tubes were crisscrossing corridors meant for human use. It looked exactly the same as Zuellni's Mechanical Department. Or not exactly the same. This city had more tubes than Zuellni. It was a more complicated

maze. So dense that Layfon couldn't see through to the central area . He didn't smell any rot. What tickled his nose were the special smell of oil and gel and the weaker smell of metal and chemicals.

"The air down here is terrible, and you guys have been working in this kind of place?" Sharnid frowned.

"If we had more light, it would feel more spacious here."

"But we can't use a flare here. It might catch fire."

"Exactly. Felli, anything strange?"

"Nothing so far."

Nina nodded. "I see. The thing from yesterday night is hiding. This has to be where it is."

"Do you believe us, captain?" Layfon said, surprised. Although Felli sensed the creature, Layfon was the one who confirmed it. The 5th platoon didn't seem to believe him. And even Layfon himself lacked the confidence to guarantee what he saw had been true.

"Of course. What reason do I have to doubt what you two saw?"

"......Yeah, you two aren't the type to lie," Sharnid agreed.

"And I have my suspicions."

"Huh?"

"Since this city still 'lives', then it shouldn't be strange that that thing exists, right?"

"Ah....."

Zuellni in its little girl form surfaced in Layfon's mind.

"I think what you two encountered was this city's consciousness ."

"I see....."

"We'll decide on what to do once we reach the center of the Mechanical Department. We'll split into two groups. Sharnid and I together, and you move alone. Is that all right?"

Layfon nodded.

"If you don't find anything, meet back here in one hour. Let's go ."

Layfon, alone, headed deeper into the maze.

"..... Why?"

This question hovered in Leerin's mind. It was hard to believe Gahard Baren had appeared here.

"What..... did you do?" Derek said. "Is this Kei in your body? I heard that your Kei vein was destroyed....."

Yes.

Rumor had it that Gahard's Kei vein was destroyed in his match with Layfon, and he had lost his consciousness and fallen into a vegetative state. So why was he here?

No Dite armor wrapped around his remaining arm. Gahard was wearing a worn out and thin hospital robe. They could see his stomach through the thin robe. It was once full of muscles, but they had now disappeared through a long period of time spent in the hospital.

"You've given up your humanity," Derek said.

Gahard's dominating eyes did not belong to a human.

"I don't know how you gave yourself up, but what did you come here for?"

"....."

Gahard hadn't opened his mouth. It was as if he was eating with his mouth closed, and noise sounded from his stomach.

".....Uh."

And that noise became louder and louder.

"Close your eyes and cover your ears!"

Gahard's entire body shook abruptly.

"Kaaaaah!!"

It drowned out Derek's voice. Glasses and eating utensils shattered around them. Their bodies shuddered, their eyes and ears enduring intense pain. The ground swayed.

When the noise stopped, Leerin wondered whether her eardrums had burst.

Then.....

"Uuh."

The moaning of her father and the shaking of the ground proved to her that her eardrums were still intact. Leerin opened her eyes and saw Derek kneeling on the ground.

"Father!"

His clothes were torn, revealing the old yet still firm and strong body underneath. Blood seeped from his back.

"Could that be Roar Kei? You shouldn't be able to use the ultimate move of the first Luckens," Derek said and vomited blood

. The Katana he used to support his weight broke under him. This wasn't any normal Katana. It was a restored Katana. The vibration earlier had destroyed its alloy structure, weakening it.

"You.....What did you do....." Derek toppled.

"Father!"

Derek showed no response. Blood pooled around him. Leerin's cheeks paled as if Derek's blood had also drained the blood from her face.

"Ah, Aah....." she stood up and ran to Derek, completely forgetting Gahard. Losing Layfon and then the father who brought her up from when she was a child had stripped off Leerin's sense of the present.

"Father....." she shook him, his blood staining her hands.

"No.....That.....Please don't leave....." she shook her head like a child, desperately shaking Derek.

"Hurry, get up. Father.....Everyone.....We have to wake everyone," she cried, cried like she was a child. She was always the first to get up, and next was Layfon. They would call everyone after preparing breakfast. Derek was a Military Artist, but he always stayed in bed. It was difficult to wake him up.

Yes, he was just asleep like he was in the past. Yes.

"Father....." she called. She didn't hear the sound of Gahard above her. Her consciousness was rejecting it.

Just when the noise reached its climax.....

A beast landed beside her.

Thick silver fur swayed. The beast stood in front of Gahard as if to protect Leerin. It had the body of a dog, but it wasn't a dog. Its abnormally long ears stretched backwards under long fur, and the toes at the tip of its limbs had not devolved into those of a dog. It supported its body like a human female caressing her five long fingers. Its lengthy tail wrapped around Leerin. Human-like pupils burned as they glowered at Gahard.

Gahard's mouth opened.

External type burst Kei, the ultimate move of the Luckens – Roar Kei.

His mouth opened to destroy the structures of particles. But what came out of that mouth was just the noise of the night.

".....Speaking of which, you've also read father's secret book, haven't you?"

Hearing that new voice, Gahard turned around.

With the small back of his leaning against the broken metal fence, there Savaris stood.

"Well, you couldn't have reached this stage if you weren't the way you are.....but, isn't it a shame that you didn't realize this while you were still human? Or are you now satisfied because you're finally able to perform that move?"

While speaking to Gahard, Savaris observed the fallen Derek.

"To have suppressed the vibration of the Roar Kei with the threatening variation of Internal Kei.....Quite some work there. Perhaps I should say, as expected of Layfon's Master? No other person could have achieved this."

Meaning Savaris had canceled the second Roar Kei attack.

"But because of this, I've gained some valuable experience. Nobody's used this move on anything other than filth monsters, so this is what it's like when it hits a human. It's fortunate that Layfon isn't aware of the consequences of this move."

"......Lay.....fon....."

Savaris smiled at Gahard's first word.

"Oh, so you still remember? I was afraid you slept for so long that you had forgotten him. I knew you'd make a move after you woke up, but it's just a little different from my expectations. I didn't think you would be so energized since your body's condition was so bad."

"Where.....is he? Lay.....fon....."

"Or maybe because you couldn't hang in there, so you managed a rebirth through stubbornness?"

"Lay....."

"What's torturing you? Your ambition? Dreams? Evil means? Or is it everything? Desire? Outrage? I've already told you that age has nothing to do with it. A Heaven's Blade successor is born to be a Heaven's Blade successor. That's how our fates are. It has nothing to do with speed. You should now probably understand the result of your vanity."

"Uh, Ah.....Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Hahaha! Are you angry? Then come. Not Layfon, but I, shall be your opponent. If you win against me, then you can become a true Heaven's Blade successor."

Savaris backed away from Gahard's sudden attack, and using that momentum, he leaped over the fence onto the street beyond.

"Follow me. I've already prepared the battlefield."

Savaris vanished in the next second. As if to follow him, Gahard also disappeared.

Leaving Leerin alone to stare at the back of Derek.

"Father.....The blood, it won't stop....."

Tears rolled down her cheeks, her hands and knees stained with blood.

And she looked at the beast.

Someone was standing behind it.

"......Ah."

"It's all right, Lee-chan."

"Synola-senpai.....Why?"

"We can save Derek. Don't shake him anymore. He's got a few broken ribs. It'll be troublesome if they damage any of his internal organs."

"Senpai."

"You've done your best. Now rest," Synola gestured at the beast and patted Leerin's head.

Feeling her consciousness fading, Leerin fell into a slumber. Synola caught her as she fell towards the inert Derek, then she placed her on the back of the beast.

"If only sleep could heal his wounds.....but it's not that simple."

Synola breathed out deeply and lifted her head. "Damn that Savaris. He was deliberately late. It might have been too late if not for Grendan."

The beast Grendan leaned its head against Synola's arm. Wind rose around Synola.

"Your Majesty....."

Three figures knelt before her.

"Take Derek to the hospital. I'll bring this child back to the dormitory. Lintence, is the battlefield prepared? You stay over there and keep watch. Just in case."

"Yes."

Two figures disappeared at her orders.

"It's so exaggerated to just eliminate a harmful bug," Synola said and studied the damage around her.

"I have to give out funding too, and also an explanation about Derek. The royal family has already forgiven everyone related to Layfon's case.....but it's still hard on the child if the public doesn't agree."

"Your Majesty....." the remaining person said. A woman with long dark hair who looked like Synola. "....It's about time to return to the palace."

"Yeah—" she looked anything but wanting to return.

"Your Majesty!"

"But there shouldn't be a problem with the governing of this city even if I'm not around. It's like it doesn't.....doesn't really need me."

".....Please don't be willful. Perhaps there really won't be a problem when Your Majesty's not around, as there's the Parliament and I here to manage it. But this is an issue of responsibility."

"If you need a symbol, then all you need is this child here. If it's about the public, then Kanaris, you're enough. Why don't you just become the real Queen?"

"Stop joking. I can't command the Heaven's Blade successors. If that happened, we might have a second or a third Layfon."

"That child didn't go on a rampage because of that."

"Even so, look at Savaris. Doesn't that say there's a need for Your Majesty's pressure to manage them?"

"Ha~~ Ah~~ .....Geez."

She looked at Leerin as if running away from Kanaris, and sighed.

"You're also a Heaven's Blade successor. Aren't you being too serious?"

"I'm very tired because of a certain someone," Kanaris said.

"Well, that's harsh."

"Whatever it is, hurry up, toss away this alias and return," Kanaris frowned and left.

"Really....." Synola made a face. "Even if you tell me to return....."

She lifted Leerin.

"My existence is meaningless if not all twelve Heaven's Blades are here."

She suddenly recalled Savaris' words. "A Heaven's Blade is born to be a Heaven's Blade.....Then Layfon isn't my Heaven's Blade? Perhaps....." she shook her head, disbelieving the ridiculous thought.

"It's useless to consider what has been lost," Synola carried Leerin and left through the hole in the wall with Grendan.

Savaris leaped from the walls and roofs of different buildings to run in the moonlit night. Gahard followed him in much the same way.

What exciting scenery.

"If you were that good when you were still alive, I would've taken care of you more," Savaris laughed mockingly and leaped to stand on a place that was higher than the tallest building in Grendan.

In mid-air.

Gahard similarly landed on air.

"You can see it right? Come up," Savaris nodded in contentment .

Gahard looked around him.

"You're standing on Lintence-san's steel threads. They're as thin as spider threads, but they don't break easily, so don't worry. But if you lose balance, your weight will drag you down and you might be split in half on a steel thread, so your feet must always be filled with Kei. And don't think of escaping. If you do that, Lintence-san will gather all the steel threads and cut you into pieces. Aside from that, we've decided to hold your burial ceremony at the Luckens' family home," Savaris explained with a smile. "I think you understand me, don't you? I'll be happier if you can say my name. Either way, you're my junior in the same Military Arts school. Though I didn't look after you much, you have in turn looked after my brother. It's embarrassing, but I still want you to call me by my name."

"....."

"Have you recalled my name? What a shame. Looks like you've surrendered totally to the filth monster," Savaris said. He didn't look like he cared.

Grendan had a fight with filth monsters about one month ago. A filth monster in its aged phase seized an opening created by the larvae attacking the city and entered the city's inner area. The Heaven's Blade successors had all sensed the invasion and subsequently chased after it, but this filth monster was a strange parasitic type. It could live off a human body by absorbing

nutrients from its host. Grendan's Psychokinesists had trouble finding its location.

And that was when Savaris suggested a plan.

After tracking the filth monster several times, they found that the filth monster tended to attack a new host when it was about to exhaust all of the nutrients of its current host. The time when the filth monster transferred to another host was the best timing for a Psychokinesist to discover its location, and also, the host would move according to his original personality, so that would create an opening to eliminate the filth monster.

Savaris and a huge number of Psychokinesists waited for the next moment when a victim would be attacked, and they prepared for the filth monster a host of their choice.

Gahard.

Although the filth monster almost escaped, Savaris' preventative measure worked, allowing Gahard to become the filth monster's new host. Affected by its host's hatred, the filth monster also developed hatred for the people associated with Layfon.

That was what Derek had sensed.

"You're serving the city's defense in your very last moment as a Military Artist. Is that your wish?" Savaris said as he inserted several cards into the armor on his arm. Dites in the form of cards. He had already inserted the cards into the armor on his legs.

Savaris never knew whether that was Gahard's wish..... Gahard's wish when he was in a vegetative state.

He didn't need to know.

"Military Artists who can't fight against filth monsters are worse than trash. Shouldn't you thank your senior for kindly preparing this last glorious mission for you?"

Gahard howled. Savaris didn't know whether it was Gahard's outrage or the filth monster's howling. He ran on the thin steel thread to close in on Gahard, smiling as he did so.

"Let me confront you a little bit seriously.....Restoration."

Light shot forth from his limbs to cover his entire body. The card Dites expanded into their original weight and form. An exquisite design gathered around the armor above his elbows and on his legs, giving off bright white light that melted into the air of the night.

Savaris's Heaven's Blade had been restored to its original form.

He lifted his arm and with the sound of the air being torn apart, his arm received Gahard's fist.

"Not a bad sudden attack," he said, relaxed, as if he was just taking off his jacket.

Gahard kicked out at him. He backed off a step. Gahard's next kick followed, he was performing consecutive kicks on the steel thread.

"Hahaha. Not bad!"

The air around Gahard spun. On occasions, blades of air assaulted Savaris from a direction different to Gahard's kick. As the number of kicks increased, so did the number of air blades, but Savaris avoided them all with ease.

"Hm, I'm happy. Who would have thought you could execute this move so perfectly? I really want my brother to take a look at this."

His smile remained.

"I wanted to fight seriously with someone from the same school. That was why I chose you. It's great that you haven't failed my expectations."

Gahard continued his attacks in the same pattern as Savaris leaped around. The Heaven's Blade successor received a kick on the armor plate on his arm, which sent him flying. Gahard increased the speed of his next kick. Wrapped in the wind of his spin, it was a decisive attack that simultaneously released Kei along with Gahard's kick.

Blades of air shot towards Savaris like rain. Facing the invisible attacks as he kept his flying pose, Savaris breathed in deeply.

"AH HA!"

And blew out his Kei that completely eliminated the air blades, leaving behind the wind of Gahard's spins.

"This is one way of using Roar Kei," Savaris smiled as he landed on a steel thread. "And also, even if you don't execute the entire move, as long as you can bounce back the Kei, then....."

The lower part of Savaris' body blurred.

Gahard crossed his arms before him reflexively.

A sound that felt low and heavy. Then Gahard's body floated.

"Don't you know the "Fierce Wind Kei" style? It doesn't matter if we don't use the wind when our basics are grounded in the Luckens' style of Kei. Our moves are powerful as long as we move with the flow. The "Quick Wind" move is made with its flow along with the effect of additional Kei training, and that levels up the power of the move into "Fierce Wind Kei". You didn't do a bad job with it, but I already knew what it'd be like. As expected, it's not as satisfying to fight with a guy from the same school."

About to deliver a kick, Savaris lowered his leg.

The expression on Gahard's face made Savaris think "How could this be?"

A human face emerged from the threatened beast that was Gahard.

"Why such despair? Can Gahard's human consciousness still remain? Have you realized the distance between you and a Heaven's Blade successor.....On that day, you failed to obtain the Heaven's Blade title even though you got hold of Layfon's weakness. Have you finally understood that?"

"I, I was.....I was....." Gahard's lips trembled to weave the words.

"Oh? you can still talk normally."

"I just.....couldn't allow it. That brat.....a Heaven's Blade successor on par with the young Master.....Became a Heaven's Blade successor at a younger age than the young Master.....I couldn't tolerate it."

The light of humanity shone in his eyes.

Had he escaped from the filth monster's control?

"I decided.....to defeat him. For that brat to become a Heaven's Blade successor.....It must have been chance. I couldn't stand him.....and.....his dirty hands....."

"Enough self-defense. How unsightly."

Savaris cared nothing for the dying words of a man controlled by a filth monster.

"Either way, the fact that you threatened Layfon won't change. You're also responsible for it. As a senior, shouldn't you have participated in the match calmly and pulled him down from his

position rather than threatening him before the match?" Savaris' body swayed lightly, and in that second, internal Kei spilled out from his body, making the air vibrate.

"You're only at a passing level in terms of keeping the principles of a Military Artist. At least die and leave a good memory for my little brother. No more of your unsightly protests."

"Ugh, Ah, Ooh....."

Pain showed through Gahard's icy words. The human existence disappeared again in his eyes. The pupils that showed control before changed back to a filth monster's. As if to match that alteration, Gahard's body changed.

"Finally realizing that you can't win as a human, huh? But....."

Gahard's body expanded. The tattered clothes tore apart, exposing the muscles in bunches. A black body. The expansion stopped after the body was three times its human size. Huge wings appeared on its back and thick scales covered it from head to toe. Fingers were replaced by three long claws. Long and sharp teeth showed through the mouth.

A roar rent apart the night sky.

Savaris watched coldly as the filth monster declared its presence in Grendan.

"You guys lost to us outside the air purification system. What can you do inside then?"

The lazy smile had been wiped off Savaris' face. A sharp expression like that of a blade emerged to stare at the filth monster.

The three claws swiped at Savaris.

Savaris' body dispersed into the wind.

It was an illusion.

"Gahard Baren, this is my last mercy to you."

That voice sounded from all around the filth monster. Everywhere were Savaris' images. Like an army of Savarises, each Savaris faced the enemy with a different pose.

"Die to Luckens' most elegant move."

Combined Internal and External Kei Variant – Luckens' move – Thousand Man Rush.

Countless Savaris made their moves. They attacked at point-blank range. The filth monster had no way of resisting.

Batter, hit, kick, attack, slash, shoot, destroy, twist, crush.

Numerous attacks fell onto the filth monster without ceasing, pounding down that thick outer shell. The filth monster didn't have the time to think as it was assaulted from all directions. Its self-protection function worked automatically underneath the innumerable attacks to make changes to its body. Having lost its outer shell, the black body transformed.

In that split second, the rain of fists ceased.

It was Gahard's painful face. Voiceless, he looked at Savaris bitterly as if to convey something.

"Scum," Savaris said against his junior's pleading. His fist landed on Gahard's face and broke through the filth monster's body.

"If I had known you'd be scared of this, I wouldn't have used you," he said coldly as the remaining Savaris' assaulted the filth monster at the same time, completely tearing it into pieces.

"All done....." he laughed, watching fragments of flesh fall through the gaps of and onto the steel threads.

"Guess I gotta nail the coffin lid firmly. It'd be terrible if people see what's inside.....But is a normal coffin big enough for it?"

He rested his chin on his palm and pondered.

"Never mind."

And gave up.

"I'll just let father handle this."

So that was what happened.

Lintence watched the dismemberment of the filth monster's body.

"It's finished," he confirmed. Everything was fine now. He retrieved the steel threads as if he hadn't seen Savaris still standing on one of the threads.

Although Savaris seemed to be grumbling about something as he fell, Lintence didn't bother to listen. Savaris had no right to be a Heaven's Blade successor if he could die from that height.

Speaking of which.....

What Lintence thought about wasn't the filth monster's corpse, but the fight just then. The move that Savaris used – Thousand Man Rush. Layfon stole that move from the Luckens and used it as his own. He didn't just remember parts of it. Even Lintence couldn't understand the structure of a move just by looking at it.

"No one is better at understanding the skills of Kei than he."

Besides Lintence's skill in steel threads, Layfon had turned almost all of the skills in the Dojos of Grendan into his own. He was able to digest those moves and use them just by observing them. The fact that Layfon could become familiar with those moves in a shockingly short period of time had overwhelmed even Lintence.

"Is that guy a seed to transport those skills to the outside of Grendan? .....Was he born with that mission?"

He gazed at the city as he thought of the only person whom he acknowledged as his apprentice.

Nothing reflected back in the darkness of the night.

Layfon headed deeper to the inside of the Mechanical Department illuminated with pale green light. He had spent an entire night at Zuellni's Mechanical Department, but the silence here gave off a bad feeling. It was even quieter than the buildings after school hours.

"Did anything happen?"

"Felli.....What's wrong? Answer me."

Background noise entered Nina's voice. The same happened to Sharnid's voice, as if his voice was coming from a far distance.....

Suddenly.....

"Huh?"

His vision turned black, and the background noises ceased.

"Felli, What's happened? Felli!?"

Even though he shouted into the transmitter, his voice only vanished into the bitter darkness.

Layfon was left alone in the dark.

Chapter 6: Scarlet pride

A bad feeling made him irritated and impatient.

"......Uh."

Someone was collapsed on the ground, underneath the trees by the entrance of the Mechanical Department. Gorneo went down to check on the person. She was the Psychokinesist of the 17th platoon, named Felli, who had unashamedly drawn Layfon into the Military Arts course. He felt her forehead. She had only fainted .

"Looks like she hasn't gone overboard."

He was worried when he saw Shante and this girl arguing.

"Geez, she's not that little anymore!"

As if a beast was living temporarily inside her, sometimes Shante acted in a way unfitting for a Military Artist. This had given Gorneo a headache.

Shante was an orphan, a point that made her similar to Layfon. Unfortunately, she had lived for a long time under the care of non-humans. Erupa, an enormous city-like forest, specialized in raising livestock. In its possession were many different kinds of animals, and Erupa sold information to other cities on the best breeds of animals it had. Among this colossal number of animals in the city, some of them had escaped the eyes of the management and lived in hiding in the deeper parts of the forest.

Although no one knew whether Shante's biological mother abandoned her in the forest, but when the Wild Animal Investigation Unit found Shante, the young girl was already hunting alongside her "other" mother, a beast. Her ability in Kei had allowed her to live together with these animals that hunted for food.

The Military Artists in the Investigation Unit took Shante away from the forest, gave her a name, and educated her together with other humans. Yet, for someone who had been living with wild animals, she was lacking some decisive factor that would allow her to naturally fit in the human world. In the end, she was delivered to Zuellni like someone unwanted.

Gorneo knew what the lacking factor was. Shante had been raised by wild animals. The concept of trading labor for food was nonexistent for her. In the five years since Gorneo had entered school, he had been looking after her. Only recently did he manage to turn her way of thinking back onto the right track, but that was only thanks to Shante's hunting instinct and her place in the platoon. Wild animals hunted in packs. A platoon was similar to a pack for her, keeping her entrenched in the way of animals.

"Damn. It was my mistake to tell her about Layfon."

He laid Felli down neatly and entered the Mechanical Department, jumping in through the hole in the floor of the lift. It wasn't easy to climb down the cable, but that was probably the same for Shante.

Because of Gorneo, Shante had marked Layfon as the enemy. Although Gorneo had explained to her about Layfon's past, she still had been waiting for a chance to hunt down the enemy. The narrow space inside the Mechanical Department, a place where movements were made difficult, was the best hunting ground for her. She thought she could definitely defeat Layfon here.

"Damn."

What a naive way of thinking.

Raised by wild animals, Shante's patterns of thought and action were different from other Military Artists, making her unpredictable. Gorneo taught her variations in Kei because it suited her, and she had proven her suitability, but.....

"She can't defeat him at her level."

He knew the level of a Heaven's Blade successor. He understood it more than anyone else, because since birth, he had been around the person who later became a Heaven's Blade successor.

"Does she want to die?"

He prayed as he descended through the darkness.

Layfon couldn't see anything after taking off the helmet, but he couldn't have seen anything with it either since Felli's reinforcement was gone.

"What's happened to Felli? I have to go back."

He could find his way back even without his vision. He had already memorized the route he took, and it wouldn't be a problem if he were to check his route with the steel threads. Still, there was no guarantee that he would return to where Felli was.

"Damn."

Exposed here was the weakness of a small platoon. If they had seven people, one or two could have stayed back to guard Felli..... Now he felt the importance of the phrase "Only because of too few brilliant students".

"Either way, I must hurry....."

No point in regretting the past. He let Kei run through his body to increase the pace of his movements. Darkness hindered him. He couldn't see anything at all. Nina and Sharnid probably couldn't even move to another location under these circumstances.

(If they're attacked by filth monsters.....)

What would happen? Was Felli trying to say that she had discovered a filth monster? A chill crept up his spine. He could handle a filth monster in the darkness, somehow, but not Nina and Sharnid. Impatience sped him up, but who knew what would happen if he moved too fast in neglect? Fighting against impatience, he backtracked.

And he suddenly stopped.

(Murderous intent.....)

A gaze sharp as a needle pricked him from his right. A murderous intent. As if it had marked its prey. A long time ago, a kid living near Layfon's orphanage brought along his nasty dog to scare the orphans. And now, an instinct that was crueler and more bestial than that dog had marked him.

(From yesterday? No.....)

The goat from yesterday didn't have a murderous intention. Only its presence had strained Layfon.

"They aren't.....the same?"

He turned the steel threads into the form of a sword. If he moved carelessly, he'd die.

(Can it see me?)

It probably could, given how its murderous intent had marked out Layfon with uncanny accuracy in total darkness.

(To be able to see in darkness, a Psychokinesist? But.....)

If that were the case, it wouldn't be strange for the air to vibrate in the wake of the flakes' light movements.

(Anyway, since I can't see.....I'm at a disadvantage.)

He failed to even see his sword. Layfon waited silently for the other party to make the first move. Anxiety could cause confusion, but that was just a waste of time. Right now, he was worried about Felli, but he had no choice but to eliminate the obstacle before him.

The other party was also waiting for him to move. Either way, he must not let the enemy find out how he would react.

His opponent had not moved an inch. Layfon could distract the enemy's concentration by releasing external Kei, but he would risk combusting the liquid-formed selenium in the corridors. This was pure selenium mined only once a year to provide for the entire city's electricity. If it exploded, the entire city might be blown apart . Layfon didn't think there was enough selenium here to achieve that level of destruction, but if an explosion occurred, the entire Mechanical Department would be plunged into a sea of flame. Layfon would die, and so would Nina and Sharnid.

(If he's targeted me and chosen this place especially for our battlefield, then he's done well.)

A calm analysis worked somewhere deep in his mind, as Layfon waited for the other party to move.

(Speaking of which.....)

If it wasn't that goat.....He tried to figure out his enemy's identity via the method of elimination. He found it surprising that there was another unknown existence here besides the goat.

It moved.

From where it remained hidden.....No. It came from a tube Layfon couldn't see and using that tube as a foothold, it changed directions.

Layfon's sword reached out in the direction of the murderous intention.

The Sapphire Dite took an attack. Sparks flew off from contact.

Layfon confirmed the opponent's face in that split second.

"It's you!!" he called out, as red hair disappeared along with the fading light.

"Gorneo's enemy is my enemy," Shante's voice echoed in the dark.

"It's against school rules to bring a problem from other cities into the Academy city."

"This is outside Zuellni! Stupid, stupid."

"Whoa....." Layfon felt debilitated, facing such a childish rebuttal.

Shante had not stopped her attacks. She jumped through the spaces in between the corridors. Layfon couldn't predict the direction of her attacks.

(A Kei user that employs variation techniques. Has that made changes to her eyes too?)

Gorneo must have taught her the Luckens skills, but Layfon knew there wasn't such a physical strengthening skill in the Luckens family.

(Is this her special ability? Or is it the Kei technique special to the city she was born in?)

No matter. He had no way of analyzing this technique in the dark, and being unable to analyze it meant he could not steal it.

(This really isn't good. How laughable.)

He blocked all of her attacks, and Layfon couldn't help but laugh inside.

(But.....)

He didn't have the time to play with her.

".....Can I confirm something with you?" he asked.

"What?" Shante's movement stopped. Her voice sounded perplexed.

"Felli's Psychokinesis has stopped. Is it because of you?"

"Yes," she confessed immediately. "You can't see anything in the dark, can you? Then that girl was my only interference."

"......Did you kill her?" As those words came out of Layfon's mouth, his heart had gone completely numb, as if it was plunged into ice. The Kei inside his body surged in its amount, and a sound as of teeth grinding sounded from deep in his heart.

"I don't really like her, but only you are Gorneo's enemy."

"......I see."

Meaning she hadn't done Felli any harm.

The ice around Layfon's heart melted, and the grinding sound slowed. Relieved, Layfon slowly pointed his sword in the direction of Shante.

This gave her a huge shock. She had already increased the complexity of her moves. How could this guy have located her just by the sound of her movements in the wind?

"In that case, I'll play with you until you're satisfied."

"Don't get ahead of yourself!"

Shante lunged straight at him with the red spear. Layfon flicked the spearhead away with his sword and changed its direction.

"Damn you!"

Shante adjusted her position and performed several consecutive thrusts. Layfon blocked every single thrust, backing off one step at a time.

Red light exploded on the tip of the spear. This was a variation of Kei. If Layfon took it with his sword, he might get burnt.

"This is madness. If you cause a fire here, we'll all die."

"As if I care about what you say!" she shouted, and continued to rain down her attacks on him. If that spear stabbed into one of the tubes.....Putting as little Kei as possible on the tip of his sword, Layfon shook away her assaults.

"Damn!"

Shante kept on stabbing, knowing her attacks weren't effective. Layfon continued to back off, but he didn't just step anywhere, he was cautiously weighing his position before taking a step back. He hadn't lost his balance in the dark, but he was gradually losing his sense of location in the maze.

"Shante! Stop!" A voice intruded.

"Gorneo."

"Stop. This isn't what I wanted!"

Shante's attacks stopped and Layfon pulled back his sword. Through a Kei variation technique, fire appeared on Gorneo's palm, reflecting Shante's sweaty face.

"Isn't this guy an enemy? Didn't he wound Gorneo's important senpai so he can't move anymore? Then why? Why can't I kill him? "

A painful expression crossed Gorneo's face. "I don't want to kill him. This guy is a wall to me. I must overcome it. Only then can Gahard-san....."

"I don't get it! Don't get it. Don't get it. Don't get it! Kill the enemies. Eliminate any interference! I hate the Gorneo who doesn't smile. Move aside!"

Red light suffused her spear.

"No!" Gorneo called.

Feeling something strange, Layfon lifted his sword.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!'

She threw the spear at Layfon.

Kei turned flame enveloped the entire spear. If he avoided it, it would penetrate the tube behind him and set the selenium on fire.. ....

(Strike it and turn it upward, then catch it!)

He made a decision in that swift moment. The spear contacted with the blade and was bounced upward. As expected, the weapon's direction was changed.

And.....

Shante leaped up. Predicting Layfon's move, she had jumped onto the tube above to grab hold of the spear and thrust down with it. Catching the spear like that had also hurt her physically.

At a loss of what to do, his body reacted reflexively and leaped aside.

"No....."

The spearhead pointed straight at the tube that Layfon was previously protecting. Shocked, he turned around and caught the smile on Shante's face. Inside the tube came the sound of something expanding. It seemed the selenium left in it was burning.

Shante had planned to die along with Layfon.....

In that split second, the fire spraying out from the crack of the tube surrounded her small body.

"Shante!" Gorneo rushed to her side, pulled her out and held her, attempting to protect her with his body.

Layfon also moved.

Without holding back, he sent Gorneo flying with a kick. The feeling of Gorneo's ribs cracking ran up Layfon's foot. He took a deep breath.

Scarlet flame closed in on Layfon along with the rumble of the explosion.

(I hope this works!)

And he released the air inside him, praying.

"Ah Ha!"

External type burst Kei – Roar Kei.

A Luckens move. Although Savaris thought Layfon had not yet stolen this move, in reality, he had already analyzed all its details. Vibration strong enough to destroy the structure of particles shot out of Layfon's mouth, and it shattered the flame along with the tube and a lot more.... Several tubes and corridors were also destroyed.... As well as the outer wall of the Mechanical Department.

The scenery of the city lay before Layfon. The sky assaulted his eyes, vision that he hadn't used for some time. Fresh air rushed in as the fierce and wild flame rushed out.

The rumble of the explosion shook his eardrums.

"Ah!"

Heavy pressure struck his entire body. Because this was his first time using the Luckens' move, he hadn't managed to properly handle the remnants of the Roar Kei. The wind swept him into the air.

But the changes caused by the explosion didn't stop here.

The city was already weakened by the attack of the filth monsters. It had little strength to cushion the impact of the explosion. The sound of things collapsing, as of an earthquake occurring, moved the city.

Nina frowned at the shaky ground and the rumbling noise. " What's going on?"

"How should I know?" Sharnid also frowned. The shaking intensified, so much so that it was hard for Sharnid to keep his balance.

"We can't move like this."

They couldn't see anything without Felli's support. In this situation, all they could do was hold on and try to remain standing . The ground buckled wildly underneath them. Nina felt the sweat on her body. Tension caused her blood pressure to rise, but the real reason behind the sweat was because of the rising temperature around her.

"Did something just explode?" she said.

"More filth monsters?"

"......If that's the case, then we've no hope left."

Nina's serious expression cut his joke short. She reached for her Dites to confirm they were still there.

"......Sorry, I fainted," Felli's weak voice sounded in Nina's ears.

"Felli, are you all right?"

"Yeah, seems I was hit by someone, but I'm not hurt."

Nina and Sharnid put their helmets on. With Felli's revived Psychokinesis, everything was illuminated once more. Nothing had changed much around the two.

"What just happened?" Nina asked.

"It seems there was an explosion inside the Mechanical Department."

"What?"

"The selenium in the tubes was ignited. Please don't touch the walls of your corridor. The temperature inside is extremely high."

"So that's why it's so hot here....." Sharnid said and moved away from the wall.

"The outer wall of the Mechanical Department has collapsed and the fire has dispersed outside so it's all right, but the pollutants are flowing back in, so please hurry and leave."

"Roger. Is Layfon okay?"

"....."

"Hello?"

"Nothing from Layfon. It seems the flake was damaged in the explosion. I'm now searching for the original location of the explosion."

"Then..... Then...."

I must save him..... Though that was what Nina wanted to say.

"The rising temperature in the tubes might cause a bigger explosion later. Please evacuate."

"To search for Layfon is our priority!"

"I'm looking for him and I won't have time to support you. If you're just standing around getting in the way, then move back." In Felli's voice was not anxiety, but a calm chill. Still, Nina sensed dismay from her.

"I understand. We'll evacuate."

Felli didn't reply.

The shaking of the ground had stabilized a bit, but it still shook occasionally. Backtracking their trail, Nina and Sharnid safely reached the lift. All they needed now was to toss up the rope and switch on the machine to pull them up.

"Felli, you can cut it."

The vision on their helmets was cut off instantly, plunging the two back into darkness. The sounds of the rope being reeled in and the vibration underneath them enveloped the two.

"That guy, please be okay," Sharnid said.

"Are you worried?" he asked, but Nina didn't reply.

"Oi, I've thought of this before. That guy sticks in your mind, doesn't he? I don't think you need to hide that. Felli-chan might steal that guy over in this situation. Calm is what's needed right now, but it's all right to get a bit confused. Just look at Felli. As if she doesn't care, but she tries her best for that guy's sake. We know it, but we aren't embarrassed by her actions."

Nina still hadn't replied.

"Nina?"

The light from the entrance spilled in to illuminate his surroundings. As for the gola gola sound of the machine.....It was the sound of two machines working.

".....Ah, am I a moron?"

Nina was gone.

He had only fainted for a brief moment. Only the places that were hit felt somewhat strange, and he still couldn't move for now. He ran his Kei through his body and was satisfied to find the flow of Kei normal.

"Right....."

He attempted to sit up, but still felt some pain in his chest. The clothes on his front were torn with blood seeping through. That must have happened during the explosion. The temperature all around him was high, which caused him to sweat constantly. His face hurt in the dryness.

"Right, what should I do next?" he looked around, and felt a bit dizzy.

He was in a random space created inside the rubble of the collapsed ceiling, tubes and corridors. It was just high enough for him to stand in it. He wanted to contact Felli, but the flake and his helmet were not anywhere near him. They might have been destroyed in the explosion.

He was still holding the Sapphire Dite.

It was possible to open a hole in the debris then rush out before the rubble fell, and he could exit through the hole opened in the

outer wall during the explosion, and return to the surface..... Except he had lost his sense of direction when he fainted. If he rushed out now and got the direction wrong, things might turn ugly.

"Gorneo Luckens! Are you still alive?" he shouted.

"......Still alive?" a voice filled with annoyance came from the other side of the rubble. The wall of a corridor was in between the two of them.

"I seem okay."

"Ah, still alive."

The voice sounded like an echo.

"Have you got broken bones?" Layfon recalled kicking Gorneo back then to help him escape the explosion, and he didn't hold back in that kick.

"Yeah, I was struck by flying rubble."

"Sorry."

"Don't worry.....Either way, that was to save me, wasn't it?"

"....."

He really didn't know what to say with this kind of a result.

"Speaking of which, I don't understand why you saved us."

"....."

"If we died, no one at Zuellni would know of your deeds in Grendan. Without someone born in Grendan, the Student President would have kept silent, and your comrades too."

"Perhaps," Layfon nodded.

"Then why? You killed Gahard-san. Why didn't you kill us too? "

"....."

"Have you forgotten Gahard Baren?" came the sharp reproof. Murderous intent and hostility filled the face looking at Layfon from between the crack in the corridor. "Don't tell me you've forgotten....."

"How could I have forgotten."

"I can't forget.....and I don't want to forget, but I don't force myself to remember."

".....What?"

".....That's what he means to me. That's all," Layfon said, knowing this reply would antagonize Gorneo, but that was all he had to say. He thought it would have been great if he had managed to kill off that guy in the match, but if he did kill Gahard, he'd have broken the biggest principle of Military Artists and might have suffered a much more severe punishment. Either way,

the result.....If he did kill off Gahard, he was only delaying the problem.

"Damn you....."

"Is Gahard Baren dead?"

"What!" Gorneo swallowed a breath. It wasn't a murderous intention. Judging from his anger, Gahard might still be alive.....or perhaps, Gorneo didn't really know.

Anyway, when Layfon left Grendan, he hadn't heard of anything about Gahard waking from his unconscious state. A Military Artist whose Kei vein was destroyed had no chance of living. This action that led directly to another's death had always been a heavy burden to Layfon.

But.

"It's time to let go of him," he said. No matter when it was, his past would surprisingly become his own stumbling block. It wasn't possible for him to trace back to every single cause.

This had become his unavoidable reality.

In that case, he had to go around it. Go around that stumbling block. Since he couldn't eliminate the sin of killing Gahard, then he'd have to live with it. In Grendan was Leerin, who always thought of and took care of him. In here, Nina, Felli, Sharnid and

Harley.....All of the members of the 17th platoon accepted him. In order to not let down the people who accepted him, he must not allow his past to shackle him.

"If I killed you two, I'd have more enemies."

For example, there was Shante, who viewed Gorneo's enemy as her own. Other Military Artists in Grendan who had connections with the Luckens might also look at Layfon as an enemy. Whether it be the 5th platoon or friends of Gorneo at Zuellni, it was possible they'd all turn hostile towards Layfon. This would then become a nasty cycle. Nothing would have been gained.

"So I didn't kill you."

"Hmph, even you know how to say wise words."

".....But, I don't know what I'd have done if Felli was hurt."

"....."

"I'm narrow-minded. Same as when I was in Grendan, and same now.....Frankly, anyone besides my comrades doesn't matter to me. The things a Heaven's Blade successor must adhere to can't be compared with protecting comrades. I suppose this is my weakness as a human."

To the extent that this intense way of thinking sometimes went on a rampage. That was what happened in the match in Grendan and his fight with the filth monster in its matured phase.

Nina and Felli's words suppressed his way of thinking.

"I won't make the same mistake here for the sake of these people. As long as they're here.....They're the reason why I didn't kill you."

".....Then, what about my feelings?" Gorneo said. "What about my anger? Despite what I said to Shante, I truly want to kill you. As a Military Artist.....It doesn't matter to me what your deeds were in Grendan."

Layfon remained silent as Gorneo poured out his heart.

"Gahard-san is like my true older brother. Savaris Nii-san is a faraway existence to me. He doesn't even feel like family, so far away. He's the only Heaven's Blade successor in the family since the first generation. We're totally different. Everyone sees only him .....and only Gahard-san noticed me. Am I wrong to want to kill you for taking all these away from me?"

".....You're not wrong. I won't tell you to give up your hatred. What I want to say is 'Do what you want.' You're free to view my past the way you want. I can't stop you."

".....It seems you're the one who's right."

There was pain in Gorneo's voice.

"But what's right doesn't always work. You should know this too," Layfon said.

In that trembling voice was anger. "I'll, I'll....."

As if he was trying to stop himself from saying more.

"Ah, Aah.....AHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

It was neither Layfon nor Gorneo.

"Shante!" Gorneo shouted, moving away from Layfon's position .

"What is it?"

"......It seems your protection was a bit late," Gorneo replied. Shante must have been burnt in the explosion, but this feeling was something else.....

A more intense pain assaulted Layfon's chest as he thought back to the time of the explosion. His chest felt as if it was being eaten by flames.

And he recalled it.

"Could this be....."

He rubbed off the blood on his chest to confirm his suspicion. The area around the wound was turning black.

"......Pollutants."

(Has the air purification system stopped working?)

So the pain on his face was also because of the pollutants, and he had thought it was the high temperature that was causing it.

The pollutants were trapped in the small space between the rubble. Layfon stripped off his protective suit, leaving only the fighting clothes underneath, and stuffed the protective suit through the crack to Gorneo. Entirely exposed to the polluted air, pain ran through his entire body.

"Wrap her in this. That'll hold for a while."

"Do you think I'll accept your pity?"

"You should know what a dead person's like. Treasure the comrade before you," Layfon said and pulled back his arm.

(Well.....There's no time to drag my feet.)

He breathed in deeply, tightened his grip on the blade and let Kei run through his body. He had no intentions of dying yet.

The blade changed into its steel thread mode. He spread out the threads through the rubbles and searched for the location of the hole in the outer wall.

"Fon Fon....."

"Felli, are you all right?"

"Don't you think that should be my line?" Felli said sarcastically.

Layfon had no answer for her.

"Just what were you doing?"

"If you ask what I'm....."

"Why did you save them?"

"....Do you have to make me mad? If anything happened to you, I'd never have forgiven them."

"....Perhaps, I was too careless."

But.....Layfon considered Shante. She had targeted him because of Gorneo.

Nina said this yesterday night after that discussion. "Yeah, Layfon. I've thought of it too. Military Artists might not be human. When Military Artists become more powerful, they might be just as you said, flesh with Kei that can only live with humans. But for us Military Artists to live normally as if we're one of them, to live with them without deliberately thinking of it, could this just be our instinctive reaction? Isn't it normal to not understand the other person, whether it be a Military Artist or a normal human? We're all the same here. We all hope to find someone who can understand us. Aren't we living in this world because of that someone? Because of those people? And for us to think of this, isn't that proof that we're human? Although our body structures are different, our ways of thinking are the same. Isn't it good that I can understand your crime? And then it's your turn to understand me. If you can connect with others like this, then you'll be okay."

His silence was interpreted as acceptance.

Layfon released all his Kei. In this narrow space, he couldn't even extend his sword fully. It'd be all right if he could use Roar Kei, but he decided not to since the result of the previous move demonstrated his unfamiliarity with it. This meant his only option was to rely on his trusty sword technique. He waited for his body to adjust to its current best condition, then he raised the point of his sword.

He poured Kei into the blade. More, and more. The blade trembled with "chin, chin" noise. He gathered the destructive force of External Kei around his blade, an amount of Kei greater than the amount he used when cutting through the scales of a filth monster.

"It's time....."

He'd slightly reduce the pressure binding the Kei together. He'd then release that Kei against the rubble around him and collapse the space he was in, leaving him with no place to retreat to.

He turned around to face Gorneo's direction. He lifted the sword high and swung down.

External burst type Kei – Sendan.

The released Kei shot out in a curve, cutting through the obstacles before him to reveal Gorneo, who was holding Shante in his arms.

"Now!"

Internal type Kei – Whirl Kei.

Half spinning, he leapt out of the rubble and past the outer wall. His arm moved to steady his body.

"Ah!"

The outside air was filled with much more pollutants than the tiny spaces in the rubble. Layfon's skin burnt and his eyeballs hurt as if dipped in flames. But he needn't open his eyes yet.

He had extended his steel threads, one bunch to wrap around Gorneo when Gorneo leaped out, and another bunch to anchor them in the ground.

But.....

They were falling and their momentum was too much for them to stop.

(No.)

Layfon should have no trouble escaping, but Gorneo might get torn in half by the steel threads. Gorneo had already used up all of his strength to leap clear of the rubble. He had nothing left to stop his descent, and Layfon was having trouble controlling his movement because of the pollutants eating at him.

At this rate.....

As if to deny Layfon's thoughts, a part of the city's multi-legs appeared in Gorneo's falling direction.

"Turn around! Step over there!" Layfon shouted, but he didn't see Gorneo move.

(Has he fainted?)

Maybe. Gorneo did protect Shante in the explosion, and he had also received Layfon's hard kick.

(Oh no.)

Layfon couldn't stop their descent in midair. Despair filled him.

A figure suddenly flew out from the hole that Layfon made, dispersing the dust and smoke.

"Huh?"

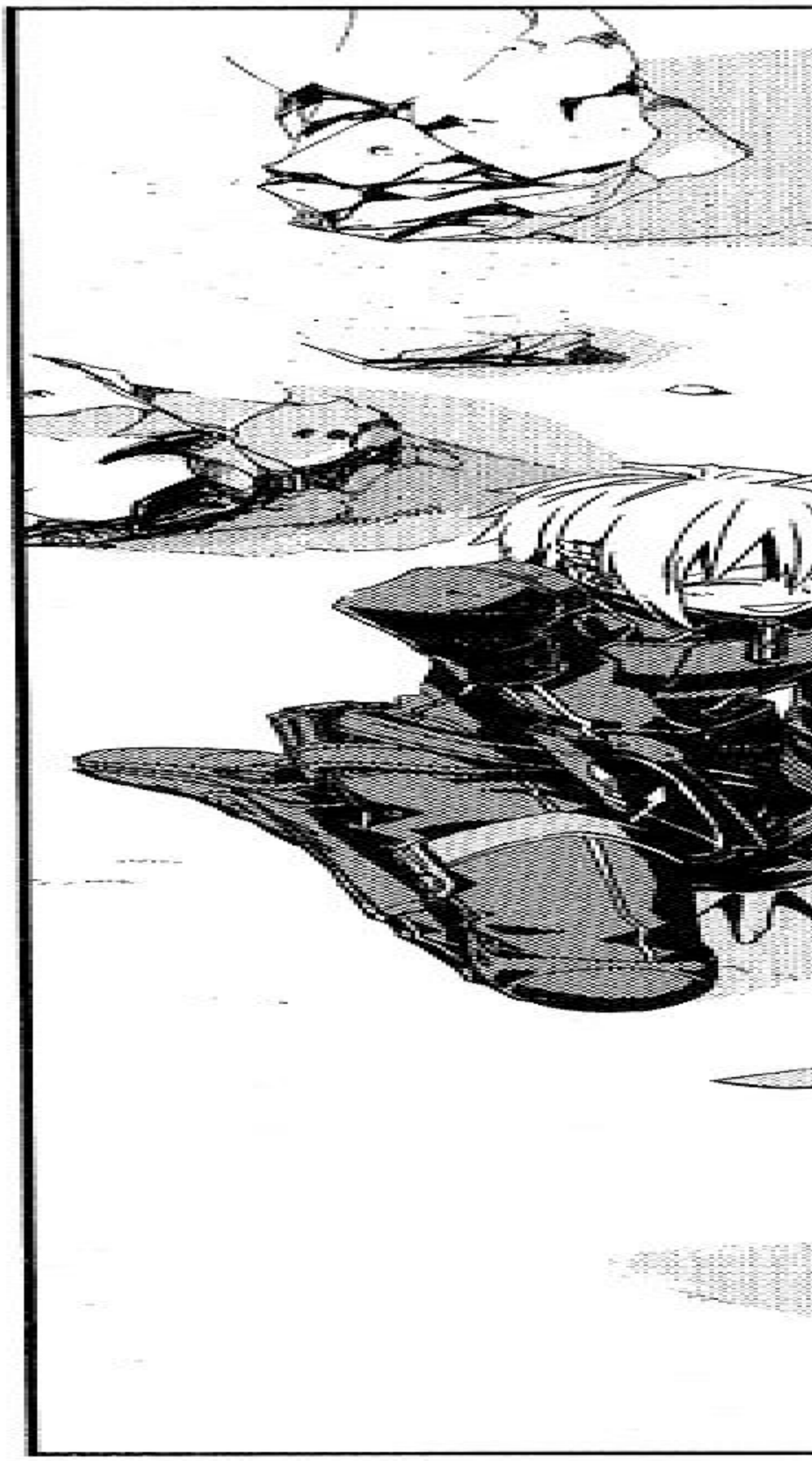
The figure flashed over Gorneo to stand perpendicularly on the city's leg. The impact of its landing banished the smoke around it to reveal golden hair.

"Captain?"

Nina smiled sourly as she received Gorneo and Shante to halt their downward rush. She had used up all of the strength in her knees to execute that feat. Layfon used the steel threads to wrap around the three of them, then pulled them up and tossed them to the ground.

A moment later, Layfon also returned to the ground.

He wasn't seeing things. It was Nina. She was sitting, weakened , next to the unconscious Gorneo and Shante.



"Guess we're all okay," she smiled, traces of tears on her reddened face.

"Please.....Don't do anything that reckless again," Layfon said and sat down heavily.

The air purification system on the ground level was still working. The pain in his body gradually faded. The wound didn't look to be healing, but at least it didn't seem to have opened up.

"Do you understand my feelings?" Nina said.

"Huh?"

"Do you understand how I feel when you're doing such dangerous things? I must have felt the same the last time too. Definitely."

"Ha, haha....."

Spacing out for a little while, Layfon chuckled. For whatever reason. He didn't know, and when he realized his actions, he was laughing loudly.

"What's so funny? Geez....." Nina said, and she also smiled.

So the two continued to laugh. When Felli and Sharnid arrived, they had exhausted their strength from laughing too much and from bearing the pain caused by the pollutants.

Epilogue

When she opened her eyes, something felt strange.

It was the ceiling of her room that she was used to seeing. Every room had the same wallpaper, but the stains on them couldn't be the same. The feeling of the blankets, the atmosphere around her. Yes, this was Leerin's room.

But why was she here? That was the source of her unease.

And.....

".....Ah"

".....What're you doing?"

Something was covering her.

For some reason, Leerin was wearing her pajamas, and Synola was trying to unbutton them.

"Ah.....Well, it isn't comfortable to sleep with a bra, is it?"

"That's useless consideration."

"Lee-chan's breasts are normal, but there isn't a need to wear this, right? Don't you feel uncomfortable?"

"I said.....that is a useless consideration," Leerin sat up. There were only four buttons for these big pajamas, and Leerin's face heated up as two buttons were already unbuttoned to reveal her bra.

"Really....." she said, calming down after buttoning up her pajamas.

(Why am I here?)

She remembered. She went to her father's place yesterday and was attacked by Gahard. But.....Everything was messed up in her memory, except she did recall seeing Synola there.

"Senpai.....My father.....is he?"

She was afraid of confirming the worst situation from Synola's lips.

"He's ok," Synola smiled. "Lee-chan's father is in the hospital. He's alright. It'll take some time, but he'll heal."

".....What a relief."

Losing strength, she lay back down on the bed. Her eyes burnt from relief. Her words didn't come out properly. Her throat shook as if it had cramps, and Leerin cried with her face in her hands.

She thought she had lost him. She thought that, once again, she had lost an important person to her.

Synola hugged her, and like that, Leerin fell back into sleep.

Synola placed Leerin back on the bed once again and left the room.

".....Was it wrong to exile that child?"

Leerin didn't hear that at all.

"But there wasn't any other way. I'm sorry."

Listening to Leerin's breathing, Synola closed the door, praying she'd once again meet Leerin on the next weekend.

Two cities existed under the same sky. Zuellni and the unknown, ruined city. The ruined city was completely destroyed from the explosion. It sat beside Zuellni like a shadow.

Golden light appeared on the edge of the ruined city. It hovered in the sky, caressing the darkness. Another form appeared in that light, a young girl, naked, with hair longer than she was tall. The city's consciousness.

The name was the same as the city's. No, that was originally the girl's name. This wasn't strange at all.

Zuellni was here.

Used to flying around in the Mechanical Department, Zuellni had now flown outside the city. She watched the sky with wide eyes. A new flash of light appeared below her, and she lowered her gaze to see a golden goat.

Sadness spread across Zuellni's face.

The goat shook its head quietly.

What were they talking about.....No humans could hear.

And after that short encounter, the goat disappeared.

Zuellni flew in a few circles, then headed back to the Mechanical Department, leaving behind the usual night of an Academy city.